

Fred Cady

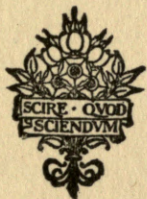
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RANGY PETE

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RANGY PETE

BY
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409
1922

BOSTON
SMALL, MAYNARD & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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(INCORPORATED)

Printed in the United States of America.

THE MURRAY PRINTING COMPANY
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

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Rangy Pete

CHAPTER I

AN individual known to all his friends and to most of his enemies as Rangy Pete sat with his sketchy frame draped over an up-ended sugar barrel in front of a building advertised to the whole world as "Ike Collander's General Purpus Store." One glance at Rangy Pete was enough to convince the most critical that, whatever else he might be, he was not a misnomer. A second glance brought out the lamentable fact that Rangy Pete was totally indifferent to the liberties which Ike Collander's advertising propaganda took with the language of the land.

As a matter of fact, he seemed quite fascinated by the sign, for there was a look of pride in his eyes as he continued to drape himself over the sugar barrel and gaze aloft at this evidence of Ike's bustling business activity. While Rangy Pete continued to stare with rapt gaze, a dribble of crimson paint trickled from his brush down over the lower clothing of his lanky anatomy and ambled its way in time through a crack in the upper face of a box labeled

"Evaporated Apples. Special. Merrill, Snaky Y Ranch."

When Rangy Pete's artistic instinct had at length been gratified, his gaze dropped low enough to enable him to discover that the paint was obeying one of the first laws of nature.

"Jumping Mavericks!" he exclaimed, "and that box's for Rough House Dan. Bet he'll say I done it apurpos. Trying to pisen him, or something like that."

Rangy Pete doubled up his frame with a jack-knife effect, swabbed off as much of the paint as would stick to his fingers, then he raised his voice in unharmonious volume.

"Hey, Ike! Cummere."

Ike Collander, being unhampered by customers, and being only half asleep at the moment the volume of noise reached his ears, lowered his feet from the imitation counter and sauntered out in the direction of the familiar sounds.

"What you bellerin' about?" Ike demanded plaintively as he thrust his head out through the doorway and encountered the dry blaze of the sun reflected back from an unnecessarily dusty highway.

"I'm just wantin' to advise you, Ike, to learn to patter your prayers," Rangy Pete remarked imperturbably, in his wonted mode of conversation. "I'm thinking they ain't nobody this side the Twin Peaks what can throw a peevish fit quicker'n Dan Merrill.

He's got a touchy spot what licker ner nothing else ain't been able to wash outa him, so I'm thinkin', Ike, if you learn pretty pronto to patter the prayers, we'll meet sometime in the Great Beyond. Ain't that what the Methody fellow said t'other night down in the tent?"

Ike Collander, knowing something of the erratic ways of Rangy Pete, did not stop to ask the reason of Pete's harangue. Instead, he sallied forth into the glaring sun and he began a personal investigation.

"That's what I'm calling some swell sign," Rangy Pete volunteered. "They ain't nobody else coulda painted —"

"But what's that gotta do with Dan Merrill?" Ike interrupted impatiently. "You don't mean to say you got me out here in the sun just to hear you tell me what a rum job you made of that sign?" Then, as Ike's eyes dropped to the level of Rangy Pete's shoes, and as one of the shoes shifted, Ike made a noise which sounded like a gasp. "You tarnation idyot," he offered with emphasis. "You gone and daubed paint into Merrill's evaporated apples. Ain't you got no better sense —"

"That's what we gonna talk over," Rangy Pete broke in, as he fell back upon his characteristic habit of tormenting the mother tongue.

At the best, Rangy's selection of words would hardly have gratified the ear of an Oxford don, but at the worst, in moments of stress, or when a cal-

culated impression must be left upon the ears of the hearers, his mode was apt to slip into a slurring drawl which ignored even the rudiments of beginnings or endings. Just now he chose to have one of his worst conversational lapses.

"You ain't got no head on you, Ike, and that's why you're branded to die sudden some day. Take this box of apples. You know Rough House's touchy over 'vaporated apples, yet you ain't got no better head than to leave the case right out here where it gets in the way of a little bit of paint when it falls off my brush. Don't you know 'at paint's gotta fall some time? It can't stay up in the air like a bird. I'd a thought you'd a knowed that, Ike. I'd a thought you'd take some care of Dan Merrill's stuff. You heard often enough 'at he likes 'vaporated apples fit to kill —"

Rangy's dissertation came to a close because of an angry gurgle in Ike Collander's throat.

"I might a knowed better'n to hire a good-for-nothing long leg like you," Ike reproached himself. "If I'd a had any sense I wouldn't a kept you round here longer'n a minute. And now you wanta blame me fer that box getting all daubed up."

"You shore don't think you ain't to blame?" Rangy Pete demanded in astonishment. "You ain't gonna say next 'at I put the box there, are you? Shorely you got a little spark of honesty in you summers, Ike. Tell me, Ike, that you got a little

honest feeling right now. I don't think I could go on living —"

Rangy Pete's plaint was submerged in a greater volume of noise which came from Ike's throat.

"We gotta do something about it, I'm telling you. We gotta do something —"

When Ike Collander had repeated the phrases a number of times, so often that his voice had lost the edge of its asperity, Rangy Pete chimed in.

"That's what I been tellin' you all along. I sorta thought it might be best if you pattered some prayers, Ike. I'm knowin' you can't think of any yourself, but if we went down to that Methody gospel-flail's tent, he might —"

"Shut up," Collander replied with more self-control. "Merrill's coming in this afternoon for a load of stuff, and I'm telling you we gotta do something. He's all-fired particular about these evaporated apples what's been coming in from the East. You'd think they's boxes of booze, the way he hugs 'em. He don't drink much red lieker, that boy, but he's sure got the evaporated apple habit."

"You're saying something, Ike," Rangy Pete supplemented, as he began to roll a cigarette. "They tell me the apple habit's worse'n dope. It sorta get's you till you can't leave the house for two minutes unless you got a piece of 'vaporated apple in your pocket. They tell me it don't act the same on all men; but it ain't made Rough House Dan any

more like a suckin' calf. He's got a tongue like a snake, and he's the boy what knows how to handle a quirt. If you ain't got no objections, Ike, I'm thinkin' I'll go for a ride this afternoon. Since you've fired me, I'll drop over to the Double K and see if they've got any use for another puncher."

"I ain't fired you," Ike snapped out. "We gotta do something, and we ain't got all day to do it."

"S'pose we swab the box down with a pail of water," Rangy Pete offered. "I'll sit here and watch you do it. You ain't much use, Ike, but surely you know enough to sling some water on that paint spot. I'll tell you how to do it."

"Yeah," Ike leered. "You don't catch me that way. You know the water'd run inside, and the apples'd swell up and bust the box."

"That's right, Ike, so they would. We got a big job on our hands. You might tell Rough House Dan that it's blood. You could say you shot a road agent last night when he's trying to steal the box. That'd put you in right. Dan's suspected all along 'at you'd horn into a fight fer him any ole time you got haffa chance, so if you told him that's blood —"

"Who ain't got no head now?" Ike intercepted the flow of words in an aggrieved tone. "He wouldn't believe it. 'Sides, any fool knows blood from paint. An' they ain't been no road agents around this way fer months. They ain't been within thirty miles of Triple Butte, and you know it, Rangy Pete, so

whyn't you think of something what's got some sense in it?"

"Thirty mile ain't so much," Rangy Pete reflected. "'Sides, you said something hadda be done. I could write you a note, signin' Dervish Dick's name to it, and I could make it look like the real thing. I'd put a bloody cross on top of it, and I'd say, 'You plugged me last night, Ike Collander, but I'm a gonna git you if I haveta swim in blood to do it.' That'd make Rough House Dan open his eyes, and perhaps, Ike —"

"No more perhapsing," Ike Collander insisted, with diminishing patience. "You know nobody wouldn't believe me when I told them I put up a fight."

Rangy Pete slipped down off the barrel with a sigh of resignation.

"Now you're talkin' like somebody who knows your father's little boy," Pete rejoined as he bent over and lifted the box of evaporated apples and placed it upon the sugar barrel where it came more nearly within his range of vision. "Ike, you're like a swaddled kid. You gotta have somebody running after you alla time. If it wasn't fer me, I s'pose Rough House Dan 'd soon be wrappin' his quirt around your legs to keep you from catchin' sunburn through that hole in your pants. You're a shiftless cuss, Ike, but if I gotta do all the thinkin', I s'pose I gotta. A kid coulda told you what to do long ago."

Ike Collander's eyes had been instinctively watching the dusty trail ambling its way between the two rows of buildings which went by the name of Triple Butte, and as his eyes followed that trail they eventually came up against a dead, monochrome wall of nothingness representing a point in the distance where earth and sky and dust and hazy sunshine all blended into one. Ordinarily, on a day like this, when the world merely seemed to drone along under a blistering sun, that dull grayness was all Ike Collander's eyes would see when they studied the trail leading out to the Snaky Y Ranch.

But now there was a fleck of activity in the gray distance which caused Ike to step out into the dusty trail and stare into the west, with his eyes shaded from the glare of the sun. Rangy Pete's eyes followed in the same direction, but without keen interest.

"'Tain't nothing but a few horses kicking up a cloud of dust," Pete informed. "'Sfunny, Ike, that you been here ten years and you ain't never afore seen a horse kickin' up the dust. I bet they's some men on the horses' backs, and if little Ike'll come up here and be good, daddy'll show him a purty man riding a horse. Now won't that be nice?"

Ike Collander returned to the front of the store. He appeared to be keen to say something to Rangy Pete, but it was the greater part of a minute before he could get his lips and his tongue under control.

"You're fired, blast you. You're fired," Ike's first words poured out in a stream. "I ain't gonna have no impertinent lummux like you hangin' around here no more. You git out, and stay out."

"Thanks, Ike," Rangy Pete replied, with unruffled voice. "Lend me the makings, and I'll be sifting along. I just about got time to decorate Triple Butte with my absence afore Dan Merrill gets here. Don't forget, Ike, to tell him 'at's blood on the 'vaporated apples. If I's you, I'd put salt and water on them quirt marks you're gonna get. It'll hurt a bit at first, but it'll take the soreness out in no time. That's what we do with the critters."

"Here's the makings, Rangy, and you ain't fired," Collander replied hurriedly. "I didn't mean nothin' what I said. We gotta stand together, Pete. What's that you said awhile ago about knowin' whata do with these apples?"

Rangy Pete looked past Ike Collander's head, and the faintest suggestion of interest came into his manner as he stared out along the Snaky Y trail in the direction of the approaching dust cloud. Rangy shaded his eyes from the sun, as Collander had done, then he held one hand in front of him, as though taking sight along some imaginary line.

"I'll be smoked if that ain't funny," Rangy Pete commented. "Whatta you see out there along the trail, Ike?"

"Nothing but something we gotta hurry about,"

Collander returned crustily. "It's Merrill or some of his punchers riding in."

"Perhaps, and then perhaps not," Rangy Pete reflected aloud. "They ain't been no windstorm fer a month, an' that means the Snaky Y trail couldn't a jumped up over night and lit down so far to the south. The Snaky Y bunch'd have to climb the Yellow Butte to come in thatta way, and they ain't gonna climb no buttes when they don't haveta."

"It don't matter. Merrill said he's coming today to get this box of evaporated apples, and that's him."

"'Sfunny. Whole bunch of cowpunchers chasin' around after 'vaporated apples."

"Nothing funny about it. Now tell me what we're gonna do."

"Oh, yah," Pete replied. "Now, 'spose you use them holes in yer head what some people calls eyes. They's a box in front of you, and it's got a tag on it what shows that somebody back East has shipped a case of 'vaporated apples to one Dan Merrill of the Snaky Y ranch. 'Cept fer that tag, I don't see that they's any difference between that box and the boxes what you got back ahind the counter."

"Gosh, Pete, but you gotta head," Ike exclaimed in appreciation.

"Most people's got a head, but 'tain't everybody knows what a head's for," Pete rejoined. "All you

gotta do, Ike, is slip the point of a screwdriver under the tacks what's holding down this tag, then if it sorta jumps over onto one of your own boxes, you can't help that none. You trades boxes and he keeps the tag. They ain't nothing unfair in that."

"Unless them apples of his does happen to be special extra —"

"Won't yours be special too when they get that tag on 'em? You should a knowed, Ike, 'at it ain't the apples what makes 'em special. It's the tag. Now cummon. That dust cloud'll be here in about ten minutes."

Ike Collander required no further stimulus. He produced the essential implements of the hardware trade and while Rangy Pete leaned against a hitching post and proved most generous in the flow and range of his advice, he hurriedly transferred the shipping tag from Merrill's box to one of his own, which, to all external appearances, was an exact duplicate. With the transfer made, he left the box bearing the Merrill tag upon the top of the sugar barrel, while he removed the paint-marked box to an inner portion of the ramshackle store which he commonly dignified by the term "storeroom."

Ike brushed away the signs of toil, Rangy Pete shifted the paint pot to the shady side of the building, and as the cloud of horsemen reached the first shack of Triple Butte the two men sat down in the doorway of the "General Purpus" store to await their coming.

Rangy Pete's gaze wandered up the dusty trail, but apart from the life represented by that dust-cloud, Triple Butte had but little to interest even Rangy's listless gaze. There were two or three dejected bronchos standing with drooping heads in front of the saloon across the way; there were other horses in the corral, and there was an intermittent sound from the saloon itself which Rangy recognized as an indeterminate effort on the part of Shifty Lizz to coax musical sounds from the only piano in Triple Butte. Shifty Lizz was a female, and for the lack of anything better she was sometimes regarded as one of the attractions about Tony Burke's saloon, the degree of her charms being regulated pro rata to the amount of Tony's liquor which had filmed the eyes of the attraction hunter.

Shifty had won her prefix from the rapid manner in which she had once disposed of a brash cow-puncher who had fancied that the eating room of Tony Burke's "Mansion House" was the proper place in which to display his affections for Lizz. At the moment Shifty Lizz had been rounding up fodder for a number of Tony's guests, but in the heat of the moment it was all shifted with such remarkable dexterity that it landed upon various weak points in the cowboy's anatomy. Since that time it had been quite possible for Shifty Lizz to while away an idle hour in the barroom for the making of such noises as now reached the ear of Rangy

Pete without the slightest fear of amorous approach on the part of any but the most utter stranger.

Now, Rangy Pete wished that the brash cow-puncher had not brought this punishment upon Triple Butte. He experienced a keen feeling of grievance against the absent puncher, and that, combined with the heat of the day, made him suddenly wish that the amorous one might be in Merrill's party.

Rangy Pete was suddenly roused from his vindictive mood by the voice of Ike Collander.

"They're makin' an awful lot of dust, an' Merrill don't ride so fast as that on a hot day."

"Yeah. Keep it up. Keep on yammering," Rangy Pete returned peevishly. "Ain't you got nothin' to do all day but sit there and yammer about nothin' atoll? This ain't no exhortin' meeting down at the Methody tent. Ain't you never gonna learn to sit still a minute and keep your mouth shut like me?"

"Like you?" Ike flared at some indignity which he appeared to find in Rangy's words. "I'm thankin' all the saints I ever heard of that I ain't like you. Look at the mess you near got us into —"

"Me get you into a mess," Rangy returned with reproach. "If they was ever a more ongrateful critter runnin' around without a brand than you be, Ike, I'd like to see it. Ain't I been a punishin' my brains to get you outa the scrape you got into by

leaving them 'vaporated apples right where the paint'd fall on them? Ain't I got you out of a hole, I'm asking? An' you got nothing to do but sit there and yammer —"

Rangy Pete paused because of the striking lack of interest on the part of his audience. Far from displaying the necessary amount of umbrage, Ike had abruptly seized his associate by the arm and he was going through a gasping motion. Collander's eyes were rolling, as though from fright or the effects of the sun, and his lips were stammering.

"Try a hot pebble in the mouth," Rangy Pete suggested. "It sometimes helps —"

Then Rangy's eyes followed Ike's dramatic gesture, and he committed the unusual offence of stopping half way through an idea.

"Gosh A'mighty!" Pete exclaimed for the second time that day, as he caught sight of the faces of the approaching riders.

For even a hundred yards distant he could see that across the face of each mounted man there was a dull, grayish bandage which covered the eyes and ran well up to the hat band and down to the tip of the nose.

"They're r-r-road a--agents," Ike Collander put his gasping into words. "An' I gotta get outa here. I got ten dollars —"

Ike made a movement as though to rise, but Rangy Pete put out a hand and returned him to his

former position with the ease of one handling a child.

"Ain't you got no sense atoll?" Rangy asked. "Don't you know road agents shoot on sight when they see a coyote takin' to cover thatta way? They oughtn't to wear them eye blankets, fer no man can shoot straight with a thing like that over his face. They'd be just as apt to hit me as you —"

Any further wisdom which Rangy Pete may have intended to impart to Collander was drowned in the clatter of hoofs and the whir of noise as the troupe slithered to a halt across the roadway, with two horsemen facing Ike Collander's store and with the balance taking an interest in Tony Burke's saloon. With a medley of fright, Shifty Lizz' strumming at the musical fount of Triple Butte came to an abrupt end. The sound of voices died away, and for a space of ten seconds or more there was the absolute calm of utter desolation.

Rangy Pete felt that Triple Butte had automatically wakened to the presence of the road agents and that this unnatural silence was but the armistice through which the leading citizens deliberated with themselves whether or not it were flirting with the Great Beyond to give battle to the diminutive army of Dervisher Dick. So Rangy's eyes darted here and there, to every opening in the walls of Tony Burke's fragile castle. For if there were to be battle, it would come from Tony's place. If Triple Butte ever swaggered, it was through the

front doorway of Tony's saloon, and at this particular moment the decision of battle or of peace would depend entirely upon the assortment of individuals who happened to be hugging Tony's bar, and also upon the state of their liquid mellowness.

As Rangy Pete sat through those seconds, he tried to recall just whom he had seen enter the saloon through the past hour. There were none of the Snaky Y boys, for Merrill's party was still due to arrive. And there couldn't be any of the Double K punchers, or the battle would have been on before this. And there wasn't Sheriff Stipples, for Stipples had ridden away in the opposite direction shortly after daylight.

Rangy Pete sighed before the ten seconds were up. The most formidable of Triple Butte's defences would be Shifty Lizz, and Shifty, he could see, had regained her composure, for she was already grinning through the open window at Dervisher Dick.

With a gesture to his men, Dervisher Dick sprang to the dusty highway, and with a pistol in either hand he walked briskly through the doorway of the saloon.

The hands of the road agents, Rangy Pete could see, were bristling with revolvers, but whatever happened to be going on behind their eyes was totally concealed by the masks. As Rangy stared, he fancied that the lips of one of the riders facing Collander's store parted with the suggestion of a smile.

Rangy promptly grinned in return.

"Hands up, you long string of horse-hide," the man bellowed, with a flourish of one of his revolvers. "Don't think you can set there grinnin' at me."

Rangy Pete's arms stretched into the air for a surprising distance, but he did not take the trouble to move from his sitting position in the doorway.

"'Twan't you I was grinnin' at," Rangy returned in an aggrieved manner. "I sorta smiled at that handsome person at your side. He makes me think of my long-lost brother."

"Swallow the chatter," the road agent elevated his voice still more, "And you too, you little fat toad. Get on your feet. Don't set there like a pair of dead coyotes. Reach for the stars, you long drink of water. Reach for 'em. Pick 'em out. Hand me that big green one what sits on top of the North Pole."

Ike Collander sprang to his feet with surprising alacrity, and Rangy Pete ambled into a standing position, with his hands thrust high above his head.

"I'm tellin' you, Mister, this ain't no comfortable way to stand," Rangy found his voice in protest. "An' I ain't gonna pick no stars 'cause I once got some star slivers in my fingers a-doin' this, and it ain't no fun gettin' 'em out again."

"Higher! Higher! Reach up and hand me down Ike Collander's chimbley."

"I can't go no higher, Mister," Rangy protested.

"You otta know that. Can't you see I broke my suspenders a reaching fer them stars, an' I got human feelings —"

Immediate diversion to the road agent's mood came in the form of a bellowing noise from the door of Tony's saloon. The sound came from Dervisher Dick who was herding the full human contents of the barroom out into the street at the points of two revolvers, and who, at the same time, was inviting his troupe inside to enjoy the enforced hospitality of Tony Burke.

There appeared to be the discipline of system in Dervisher Dick's party, for instantly, without definite instructions, the complete troupe, with the exception of two riders, disappeared through the saloon doorway and instantly there came back the sounds of revelry among the breaking bottles.

Two riders still sat their horses in the dusty highway. One stood guard over many of the leading citizens of Triple Butte who were clustered conveniently in a sunny little nook in front of the saloon. The other loomed up in front of Rangy Pete and Ike Collander. As for the rest of Triple Butte, there was not so much as a toddling child to be seen for the full length of its one dusty highway. Triple Butte, it became evident to Rangy Pete, though personally unfamiliar with the habits of road agents, had listened to the stories which had recently come out of the south about Dervisher Dick,

and was quite willing to give him full credit for a violent disposition without putting the rumor to the test.

The little cluster of citizens across the highway appeared to be in much the same mood. Rangy looked across, past the two road agents, and something in the pose of Triple Butte's leading citizenry seemed to appeal to his sense of humor.

There was Tony Burke, lean, wiry, dark of countenance, though just now growing increasingly red because of the flame of the sun and that steady sound of cracking bottles from the interior. There was Rummy Lister, Tony's right-hand man, sometimes known in more polite circles as a bouncer, and always known in Triple Butte as the one-on-the-house man whenever the courage of the guests seemed to flag. There was Lefty Merker, the set-'em-up man, who constantly held forth behind Burke's bar, and who had won the first half of his name because of the unusual habit of wearing a gun where the left hand could reach it the most conveniently. Lefty, it was rumored, had once "potted" an impertinent stranger, and because of this peculiar arrangement of his armament he had not even stopped the serving of liquor with the other hand. Lefty was supposed to possess a bull-dog brand of courage, and until this particular moment Rangy Pete had never been given cause to suspect that the breed had been crossed with any less warlike strain.

There was Buck Menzie, the stage-driver who had taken a day off; there was Lonzo Rafter, who catered to the public in direct opposition to Ike Collander; and there were a half dozen other dwellers of Triple Butte, less fiery but not less bibulous in disposition. But there was no Shifty Lizz.

A grin came to Rangy Pete's lips as his glance strayed over the inartistic group of citizens. Then his eyes crossed those of Tony Burke and he found there an encouragement to battle.

That started Rangy Pete upon a new line of thought which had nothing whatever to do with humor. He looked back at Tony Burke, and he saw that Tony's eyes traveled deliberately to the gun at Pete's hip, then to the rider standing guard over Collander's store, then back to the second rider.

Quite plainly, Tony Burke was giving his mute instructions. He was suggesting that if Rangy Pete would only start something, he would join in.

While the revelry across the way grew in intensity, Rangy Pete began to reflect. First of all, why should Dervisher Dick have led his troupe into Triple Butte? So far as Rangy knew, the accumulated wealth of Triple Butte could hardly have been gratifying to the Dervishers. And as yet, while the road agents had done a number of things which would not win them many lasting friendships, there had been no systematic attempt to collect wealth.

Doubtless they would already have looted the faro and other gambling outfits which were the rear auxiliary of Tony's establishment, but Rangy had reason to know that there was but little gold to be rifled there. It was the off season for punchers, and strangers had been scattered of late. Dervisher Dick should also have known that. Further, the road agents had not even taken the trouble to deprive the citizens of their accustomed weapons. But that, Rangy Pete knew, was the way with the Dervishers. It was the kind of daring they favored.

But now, as Rangy reflected, he wondered just what the Dervishers could hope to gain from Triple Butte. Of course, there was the establishment of Burk Laxton, the private banker, down the street; but Laxton, Pete knew, had a safe which road agents could neither crack nor carry away. Further than that, Laxton had been absent for a week, so no amount of compulsion could force a way into the doubtful treasures of that safety vault.

Rangy Pete leaned back and rested his arms against the side of Ike Collander's store.

Fight? It could be done. But what was the use? There was nothing at stake. There was not the first reason in the world why he should put up a fight, not a reason, except that challenge which flashed out of Tony Burke's red face.

Tony had southern blood somewhere in his veins, and it was plain to Rangy Pete that there was

something in the situation which did not calm that warm strain in the proprietor of the Mansion House. Perhaps Tony had more funds in the faro layout than Pete imagined.

The message in Tony's eyes was undoubted now. It was an appeal. In it, as well, there was a smack of flattery. It seemed to leap across the intervening space and say that the citizens of Triple Butte had more confidence in Rangy Pete than they had in themselves.

Rangy's eyes left the huddled group of citizens and they drifted aimlessly to the figure of the mounted rider. As Rangy looked, the other's eyes snapped back to his face, but that change on the part of the mounted rider, swift as it had been, was enough to tell Rangy Pete that Dervisher Dick had made a mistake in the man he had left upon guard. It told him further that the rider had not been watching him, Rangy Pete, but that he had been watching something else, perhaps Ike Collander, perhaps something farther down the street. And if the man's eyes left him once, they would leave him again. The longer that revelry continued across the street, the more difficult it would be for the rider to keep his glance fixed upon any one point — and men long ago had learned that it might not be entirely safe to allow the eyes to wander when looking at Rangy Pete in a serious way.

Rangy Pete chuckled inwardly, though outwardly

there was not the least flicker of change upon his leathery features. Pete believed he had left off gun-fighting, but there was something in this situation which recalled to him the old fever of battle. It was an itch creeping through his blood; it was a reawakening of the past; it was a cry of the brain which seemed to say that out of the great mass of the world's affairs the only thing which mattered at this particular moment was for him to test whether or not he had lost any of the old swiftness of finger.

In a flash there came to him the whole plan for the overthrow of the Dervishers. And it could be done with comparative safety to Triple Butte. There would be a few bullet holes in Triple Butte, and perhaps some in her citizens, but that would not matter.

Two of the road agents came through the doorway of the Mansion House with glasses of liquor still clasped in their hands.

"Here's to yer health, my purty birds," one of the men laughed loudly and waved his glass in the direction of the huddled citizenry. "Drink to 'em, Smooch. Drink to 'em hearty, 'cause maybe we won't be comin' back this way so soon."

The road agents drank, threw the empty glasses into the group of prisoners, walked to the horses, and with a standing leap sprang to the animals' backs. Then, with a twirl of their quirts, they spurred their mounts and dashed down the roadway

in the direction of Burk Laxton's private bank.

"Won't get nothin' there," Rangy Pete commented to himself. "Two of 'em gone. That'll make it all the easier."

Rangy Pete saw the whole plan now.

The next time his guard's eyes left him, Dervisher Dick's crew would think the war of Armageddon had hit them.

So Rangy Pete looked across the dusty highway of Triple Butte and he winked slowly at Tony Burke. That individual winked back in understanding.

To the best of Pete's memory there were ten of the Dervishers to be disposed of. There were two on their way to Laxton's; there were two here in the roadway, and there were six in the saloon beyond, disposing of liquid refreshments in a manner which Lefty Merker could never approve of.

Rangy Pete's arms were still stretched above his head, sagging somewhat now, and resting against the clapboard building. At his right hip was a derringer. Inside, on the wall of Ike Collander's emporium, was a Winchester.

That was all quite as it should be. For long ago Rangy Pete had anticipated the moment when he might find himself in just such an unheroic pose as this. There were many hours which he had spent in perfecting a clean, machine-like way to overcome such a handicap, and though the routine had worked out to his entire satisfaction when applied to count-

less small bottles and other objects the size of a man's heart, it had never yet been applied to the human form. So Rangy Pete's fingers itched to test its efficiency upon the person of the road agent immediately in front of him. The method was simple, and it required only the straying half-second glance of the watcher. In such a weak moment Rangy Pete would fall awkwardly to the ground, in that sprawling movement which he had practiced hundreds of times. But the sprawl, innocent as it would seem, permitted the right hand to sweep past the right hip and it gave time for the accurate flinging of bullets in any given direction.

Rangy Pete knew his own skill in flinging bullets from the hip at some object which the eye did not take time to see, and he rather regretted that it would be necessary to snuff out such a young life, even that of a road agent, in order to put his system to the test. For the rider in front of him, he had abruptly discovered, appeared to be but little more than a slip of a boy — a slip of a boy, with a clean, unbearded face and with blue eyes which could not be entirely concealed by the mask across the face.

In that moment Rangy Pete decided that it would be enough to wing the blue-eyed boy. A bullet through the right arm or shoulder would do it. Then a second bullet through the back of the other rider standing guard over the citizens of Triple Butte. That would free Tony Burke and his army. He

himself would leap back into Collander's store, and it would be worse than rough work if they did not get at least three more of the bandits when they rushed to the saloon doorway to find the answer to the noise. That would leave five, at the most six, of the highwaymen, with their forces divided, and with the most of them separated from their mounts. And the first sound of excitement, Rangy Pete knew, would bring into play every Winchester which Triple Butte owned. And if that were not enough, there was Dan Merrill and his riders expected in from the Snaky Y at any moment.

"You're sure outa luck, Dervishers," Rangy Pete reflected, as he eased his arms a trifle lower. "There'll be about enough of you left by night to give the gospel slinger a full day's work. An' the poor devil won't get no pay fer it unless we chip in and take up the dough fer him. Who'd wanta be a gospel boy with the cards stacked thatta way?"

For the time it took the two riders to reach Burk Laxton's establishment and hammer their way through the unresisting doorway, Rangy Pete kept his glance carefully turned away from the slip of a boy with blue eyes. If this were only Dervisher Dick himself it would be more satisfactory. It would be a cleaner test. For this boy doubtless would be some degrees slower than lightning with the six-shooter in his hand, and that would be too slow for him to escape what Rangy Pete intended to do.

Rangy's eyes slipped back to the boy's face.

Accustomed though he was to the surprises of life, Rangy found it difficult to repress a start of amazement. For trickling down below the band of the Stetson hat and trailing out over the upper portion of the mask was a shimmering loop of hair.

"You otta know, you young maverick, that hair ain't nothing to worry about," Rangy informed himself, "but that particular hair ain't what one would look to be decorating the foretop of a road agent."

For the loop of hair, besides having a shimmer which indicated that it must have received more attention than the male head crop generally receives in the butte district, was long and wavy and gave the appearance of having been caught up somewhere in a loop beneath the Stetson. And that would be too foppish for any youth who hoped to hold his own with the rough and ready roisterers to be found among the Dervishers.

Abruptly Rangy Pete grinned to the extent of his capacity. For he had acquired a thought, perfectly absurd on the face of it, but still with some slight foundation of possibility. And if the impossible were possible, then Rangy Pete would be enjoying the distinct novelty of being held up by a female bandit.

A female bandit? And thirty seconds ago he had almost tried out that sprawling ground shot which he had practised so many hundreds of times.

Rangy Pete continued to grin. There must be ways of discovering whether or not this blue-eyed, boyish person, with the dangling lock of shimmering hair, were really man or woman. And Rangy Pete must make the discovery rapidly, for the fate of the whole crew of Dervishers, he admitted, was hanging in the balance. If that were a boy, then a shot through the right arm. If a woman — Rangy added a shrug of the shoulders to the grin on his lips.

Still the blue-eyed person did not fall back upon words which might have betrayed the question of sex.

“Say, you young feller with the purty eyes,” Rangy began, with the grin still prominent, “you got the smoothest, cutest little chin I ever set eyes on. They ain’t nobody in Triple Butte could stand up and swap beauty with the Dervishers’ pet. D’you mind slippin’ me yer monaker, cutey, so’s I’ll know you next time from the fairy queens what drift out this way?”

Still no answer, and Rangy Pete shifted restlessly. When he spoke again, his conversational style became emphasized.

“If I’s you, cutey with the blue eyes, I’d sorta put a rope on that strayin’ bunch of hair what’s stickin’ out. It’s sure purtier than the mornin’ sunrise, but that ain’t no reason —”

Rangy Pete paused, for with a quick gesture the rider raised the left hand and tucked the hair

back beneath the Stetson. A woman, of course. That motion had betrayed the fact. But how was he to get further proof?

There was a way to test it. Suppose he dropped his arms. If it were a man, then a bullet would probably zip along in his direction; if a woman, she would not have the nerve to shoot.

Rangy Pete grinned some more. A queer testing, but he simply must know if there were a woman with sufficient courage to ride with road agents and share in the holding up of even such a peaceful center as Triple Butte. And if she were a woman, he must know more about her.

The puncher shifted the left hand half way towards his side, but with his gaze fixed intently upon that pair of blue eyes showing between the slits of the mask.

In reply there was a bark from the gun in the rider's right hand, and it was only by a hurried jerk of the left arm back to its former position that he escaped the bullet. Rangy looked at the hole in the wall, saw that the bullet had cut through at the exact point where his left arm had been; then he looked back at the rider and grinned some more.

"You sure got me guessin', purty eyes," he hazarded. "I'd a sweared youse a woman till you pulled that quick-fire stunt. You sure shot to punch a hole in me, an' that ain't no kind of a thing what a sweet little girl with blue eyes'd do."

"Who says it isn't?"

The voice came clearly, coldly, from the rider with the blue eyes, and though there was a studied thickness in the tones, it became instantly plain to Rangy Pete that its background was the soprano of a female voice. There was a firmness in the tones which demanded attention, and the coldness would have discouraged one less careless than Rangy Pete.

"Nobody, Ma'am," Rangy replied, with an affectation of meekness. "I just had a fool idea, but it's plumb wrong from finish to start. It's just the kind of thing —"

"Don't call me ma'am," the rider broke in. "Call me sir."

"Yes, Ma'am, Sir, I mean."

Rangy Pete fell silent for the lack of something impertinent to say, but that did not prevent him enjoying the situation to the full. To be held up at the point of a six-shooter may not have many charms for the average citizen, but Rangy Pete was not of the average. In the first place, he had nothing of which such a situation could rob him, unless it were his life, and according to the teachings which Rangy had imbibed from the butte districts, life was one of the cheapest of commodities. Two minutes ago he had been quite willing to plan the complete wiping out of the Dervishers, with the consequent toll which such process would levy upon the citizens of Triple Butte. He had viewed

that undertaking with the same coolness with which he would have approached the branding of so many strays, so now the meekness which came to his lips and to his features was considerably short of par value. Rangy was also finding the novelty of the situation refreshing. In Triple Butte where Shifty Lizz came as near to advertising the charms of the fair sex as did any of its other inhabitants, it was a pleasure to rest the eyes upon a nice, smoothly rounded chin and to try to draw up a mental picture of what must come between the nicely curving lips and those blue eyes which peered out through the slits in the mask.

"A beauty, I'd say," Rangy reflected aloud. "A bit young, but with lots of staying power."

"Did you speak?" the cold voice came again.

"Naw. I's just reflectin' on the sins of man what don't let no beauties come out thisaway." Rangy fell back upon his habit of slurring words. "It's funny they ain't no purty women in this part of the world, don't you think so, Mister? They was one come out here onct, about three-four years ago. She hadn't been here a week, Mister, afore they's twenty punchers wantin' to marry her. So she just naturally packed up and hits the trail fer summers else. Now they ain't a purty woman within fifty mile of Triple Butte. I's just sayin' it's funny, don't you think so, Mister?"

Rangy Pete could see that the blue eyes flashed.

Lots of fire. That was the way he liked them. If only he could trap her into some further identification of her sex.

"But perhaps yer hatin' women the way I do, an' don't wanta say nothin' about 'em," Rangy Pete added hopefully.

"You've said enough, you giraffe. This ain't a tea party."

That was very good, Rangy Pete reflected. There was not enough venom or coarseness in it for the rider to be a man. There was also the faintest, the very faintest suggestion that the person was amused.

Rangy Pete allowed his eyes to stray past the rider, out to the trail of the Snaky Y. Then they swerved back to the smooth chin and the clean lips.

"If youse takin' my advice," Rangy suggested, "you'd be tellin' this coyote of an Ike Collander to mosey along to the other side of the street. He ain't nohow to be trusted, Ike ain't."

That, Rangy felt, would be the final test whether this rider were a precocious boy with a soprano voice, or if, as he believed now, it was a woman. A precocious youngster would not shirk the responsibility of guarding two prisoners, while a girl with the sense of humor which he hoped she possessed would be quick to see that for some reason or other Rangy Pete wanted to get all other citizens of Triple Butte beyond earshot. And there should be

enough of the female curiosity in her to make her want to know the reason why.

"Don't be afraid of Ike shootin' you in the back, or of shootin' your pard," Rangy encouraged, "fer he ain't got a gun. Make him spin round like a top afore he goes, an' you can see fer yourself."

There was the least suggestion of a twinkle in the blue eyes.

"Ike, get out of here. We'd admire to enjoy your absence." The voice came with such coldness that Rangy fancied he must have imagined the twinkle in the eyes. "Pronto. Make it like a jack-rabbit, or there'll be ventilating holes in your fat hide."

Ike Collander did not wait for a second invitation. With hands somewhere on a level with his head, he hurried across the dusty highway. When Rangy Pete's glance returned from Ike Collander to the blue eyes in front of him, he found a question there which had not been put into words.

"I know you're wantin' to know what it's all about, Miss," Rangy began confidently. "But first of all, this ain't no Hindoo trick trying to get paralyzed arms, so if you'll let me slip 'em down to my sides, Miss, you got my word I won't try no fool stunt with you. All you gotta do is nod to say 'yes.'"

"Take out your gun and drop it on the ground," the blue-eyed one commanded.

Rangy Pete did as told, then he grinned broadly.

"You ain't in skirts," he said, "but you're sure

innocent. Don't you know I coulda perforated you about a few times when I's doing that, if I'd wanted to?"

"Yes, but I thought I had your promise to be good. If you want to try it over again I'll bet you anything you want to mention that there'll be two holes in your hide before you can touch the butt of your gun."

Rangy Pete shrugged his shoulders and grinned some more.

"I'm satisfied, Miss," he declared, "but I'm tellin' you I won't be noways happy till I get a look at that purty face of yours without a mask on it. They ain't nobody lookin', Miss, and this's a gay world. Would you mind just slippin' off the mask and lettin' me feast my eyes fer a fraction of a second or so?"

"Don't think I've gone loco because I let Ike Collander go. We're holding up the place and you might be a deputy for all I know. Then where'd I be the next time you saw me?"

"I'm givin' you my word I'm just plain Rangy Pete, and I'm tellin' you, girl, that if you don't let me take a peek at them purty cheeks, I'll be doing it some other day."

"How do you know I'm a girl at all?" the voice demanded, and Rangy chuckled to think how far they were from the natural pose of bandit and prisoner.

"You wouldn't a stood fer my guff two minutes if you hadn't a been a girl," Rangy returned confidently, "and now I'm tellin' you I got you marked out. They's that little mole round near the left ear, and I sure ain't never gonna forget the set of that chin or them lips. I got you branded, girl; now I'm guessin' you'd better be hitting the trail —"

Anger seemed to flash into the blue eyes.

"If you been playing with me, you ought to be shot," the voice burst out, undoubtedly feminine this time.

"Say, girl, you got your back set to the Snaky Y trail, so you can't see what I'm seein'. Nor your pal across the street can't see it either. Nor that drunken bunch inside can't see it. So it's just a confidential matter between you and me, girl."

The rider made a quick motion as though to glance over her shoulder, then turned back hurriedly.

"No, you don't pull that trick on me."

"All right, just keep your purty self settin' right where you are and I'll do all the seein' fer the two of us. They's a dust cloud back there on the trail what looks like a whole army's moving along this way. But I happen to know it ain't no army. You've heard of Dan Merrill, Miss? Rough House Dan?"

"What of him?" the girl demanded.

"I got the inside tip what tells me Dan Merrill's back there in that dust cloud, and they's some of

his bucko riders with him. You gotta take my word for it when I tell you the cloud's a whole lot bigger'n the one you Dervishers made when you come prancin' in fer your afternoon call. Now if it wan't fer you, Miss, I'd a stood here gabbin' with you till that dust cloud kinda swamped the Dervishers and blotted 'em out. That's why I got Ike kicked across the street, so's I could tell you sorta confidential. Girlie, they's two things you can do. You can give the scare sign to Dervisher Dick, or if you happen to of seen plenty of the Dervishers and think that's enough —"

"Don't call me 'girlie'. I won't stand for it. I'm a perfect gentleman."

"All right, Miss, but don't interrupt me thatta-way, fer they ain't so much time. I've set on Ike Collander's doorstep often enough to know what them dust clouds mean, and this one tells me they's a pretty little bunch of buckos who'll be here inside a half hour. All you gotta do is use your head a bit to know they're thirsty and'll shoot straighter'n that bunch of half tanks acrost the road what call 'emselves Dervishers. If you let Merrill's crew hit town while the Dervishers are here, it'll be good-bye Dick ole boy and a big period at the end of the sentence. I once went to school, Miss. That's where I got that."

The blue-eyed bandit appeared to ponder the situation for a moment and even went to the length

of a hurried glance over the shoulder. Then when the eyes centered back on Rangy Pete they were cold and deliberate.

"What's that you been trying to say about me being fed up on the Dervishers' company?"

"Nothin' much. I just sorta got to thinkin' that perhaps a blue-eyed little girlie like you wasn't with the Dervishers 'cause she wanted to be. Then if that's the case, I knew it didn't have to be the case allus. I could sorta see you settin' there on that hoss till the Snaky Y buckos hit town, then I could see you steppin' down and walkin' into Ike's store. Then they'd be me and you scrappin' side by side if it come to a showdown, but they wouldn't be no showdown, fer I know the Snaky Y boys, and they'd have Dickie boy stretched out afore —"

Rangy Pete paused because of a flash which came to the blue eyes.

"Stop right there, Mr. Preacher Pete," the voice commanded more coldly than he had yet heard it. "Don't try that reforming stunt on me. You're like some other correcting saints I've heard of. You'd reform a body even if you had to kill them to do it. I heard there was a preaching gospel boy in town, but I didn't think he'd look like you do. I'm going to hand you a bit of advice, Mr. Preacher. You can't do any good while you're packing that gun around with you —"

"But I ain't the gospel boy," Rangy Pete broke

in peevedly. "Ain't you got no eyes, Miss? I ain't got on a black coat; can't you see that?"

"Then, Mr. Rangy Pete, or whoever else you happen to be, did you really think I would sit here and let Merrill's crew sneak up and murder the Dervishers?"

"Murder?" Pete exclaimed, being reduced to short sentences for the first time in a long period.

"Yes, Mr. Pete, murder. That is what it would be. And you asked me to be a party to it. And to let that coyote, Dan Merrill, do it."

"Gosh!" Rangy Pete returned, as he watched the growing anger in the girl's eyes.

"There is only one thing saves you from getting some of that bad blood let out of you, Mr. Pete, and it's my bringing up. My fingers are just itching to put a hole in you, but here's my answer."

With that, the blue-eyed rider raised a six-shooter and fired three rapid shots into Ike Collander's newly painted sign. Rangy Pete glanced up and saw that the bullets had cut as neat a triangle as he himself could have done at the same range. In immediate response, there was a rush of men from Tony Burke's saloon, and the picture they presented was formidable. The most of them were doubly encumbered, with a six-shooter in the right hand, and with a glass or bottle of liquor in the left. Their hats were awry, their clothing was even more tousled than when they arrived, and on the whole

they presented the appearance of about as reckless a band of cut-throats as even Rangy Pete would care to meet.

At their head was Dervisher Dick, who, at the distance, seemed to be a big swarthy person, and who drew the mask over his face as he came into the doorway.

"Even *that* is better than Dan Merrill," the girl rider declared, with what Rangy Pete fancied was more than the average show of bitterness.

Rangy knew nothing about psychology, yet he felt that the moment was a most opportune one for pressing inquiries upon the blue-eyed rider. Rather, it would have been opportune except for the booming of Dervisher Dick's voice.

"Hey, you, what you firin' them cannon about?" the Dervisher leader bellowed. "Can't you see we ain't half lickered up?"

The girl turned and pointed in the direction of the Snaky Y.

Dervisher Dick tinted the air with much profanity, and mixed with it was a demand to know who might be riding to the rescue of Triple Butte at this most inappropriate hour.

"It ain't nobody but a whole army," Rangy Pete informed from across the street. "Dan Merrill's ridin' into town with about forty-fifty riders, that's all. They's a shine on fer tonight."

Rangy Pete was surprised at the glibness with

which the lies sprang to his lips. Ordinarily the prospect of a fight between punchers and bandits would have had a strong attraction for Pete, and he would have gone to considerable pains to assist such a function in the direction of its natural climax, but just now he found that he was keen to hurry the Dervishers out of Triple Butte and so beyond the possible wrath of Dan Merrill and his punchers. The only reason he could find for this change of viewpoint was the question of the personal safety of this blue-eyed rider immediately in front of him.

"Funny, ain't it?" Pete remarked to himself; then he added aloud, "Yeah, Dick; an' they all got their Winchesters, an' they been practicin' up 'cause they's a rifle match on tomorrow with the Double K —"

Dervisher Dick roared out a sound which the bandits interpreted into a command to mount, for almost instantly the whole squad was in the center of the road, while the two remaining road agents dashed up from the direction of Burk Laxton's bank.

"Get anything?" the leader demanded.

"Locked tighter'n a drum, and Laxton ain't nowhere to be found," one of the men informed.

"That don't matter. We'll be back," Dervisher Dick declared. "So long, Triple Butte."

"Wait, Dick," the blue-eyed rider called out. "You're overlooking something."

"Well?" the leader demanded, as he pulled his horse in again.

"You know I always did like evaporated apples," the girl replied coolly, "and there's been a full box of them staring me in the face for the last fifteen minutes. I know they'll be good, because they're marked with Dan Merrill's name."

Dervisher Dick bellowed an exclamation of approval as he leaped from his horse and bounded across the roadway. He stooped over the box which had recently been drawn from Ike Collander's stock to be decorated with the Merrill shipping tag, and as he fingered the tag he whooped out further approval, which may or may not have been due to the unwilling hospitality of Tony Burke.

"Hist her up, boys. I'll carry this myself," he roared, as he tossed the box to his horse's back and sprang into the saddle.

"Tell Dan Merrill I'm most uncommon grateful," Dervisher Dick called back over his shoulder, as he waved a gesture of opprobrium in the direction of Triple Butte, and as the cavalcade sprang into a gallop towards the trail which did not lead to the Snaky Y.

Triple Butte stood quite still and watched them go, being so grateful at the opportunity to rest its palsied arms that it had no thought of sending any bullets in the direction of the retreat.

"Now wouldn't that hog-tie you?" Rangy Pete

inquired of himself, as the dust swirled down the highway, "and did that blue-eyed person give me the wink or didn't she?"

Rangy Pete sighed laboriously; then he looked across the highway and the grin returned to his lips.

The citizens of Triple Butte, as they were gathered before his eyes, did not present a heroic spectacle. There was too much rubbing and shaking of numbed arms, and there were too many vainglorious oaths as to what they would have done under other conditions. Of them all, Tony Burke was the most outraged, for he had lost money and liquor. Rummy Lister and Lefty Merker were but little more exalted, for their prestige could not be said to have improved while their hands were fanning the air above their heads, and the particular choice of undesirable words which now slipped from their lips appeared to be chosen with a view to regaining some of the lost dignity. Buck Menzie and Lonzo Rafter, having neither prestige nor dignity of which they could be robbed while their hands were airing, were accepting the situation with much less display of anger, while the balance of Triple Butte's line-up were loud in their demands for blood.

Rangy Pete picked up his revolver, slipped it back into its holster and ambled across the roadway.

"Whyn't you do something when I give you the wink?" Tony Burke loosened some of his restrained emotion. "You been boastin' you could shoot the

wings offen bumblebees, an' yet you stood there with your hands clawin' the air—"

"You don't mean to say that was you givin' me the wink?" Rangy asked innocently. "Honest, Tony, I thought youse blinkin' back the tears 'cause of all that good lickin' you lost fer nothing. Gosh, Tony, if I'd only a knowed you wanted me to fight we could just naturally a perforated the Dervishers with holes. They got a bad scare. Didn't you see that? They put one whole man to watch only a dozen of you bad boys, an' that shows they're kinda scared of Triple Butte —"

The balance of Rangy's thought was swallowed up in the volume of a unanimous growl which came from a dozen of Triple Butte's citizens. Out of the confusion of that sound there emerged one voice which Rangy Pete could identify. It was Lefty Merker, the set-'em-up man, who, still smarting under the threat of lost prestige, felt that it might be well to make a bold stand now.

"I don't remember seeing you do anything so awful brave, Pete," Merker growled out.

"What's that I'm a hearin'?" Rangy Pete returned, his voice grown cold and free of all suggestion of humor. "I'm thinkin' my ears have been playing tag with me. Ain't that so, Lefty, er did I really hear you say something, just some little thing?"

Rangy Pete stood quite still, in careless pose,

his hands resting easily akimbo, but there was something in his voice and manner which told every citizen of Triple Butte within earshot that a crisis was knocking on Lefty Merker's front doorway. Except for that one stranger whom Lefty had dropped with a left-handed shot, Lefty Merker was an unknown quantity in Triple Butte. His reputation as something of a bad man had been manufactured over the bar with the liquors he handed out, and up to date none of the citizens of this semi-peaceful community had cared to dispute the brand which he put upon his own manufactured product. So when Rangy Pete used words which challenged Lefty's remarks, Triple Butte forgot instantly that it had recently been visited by the Dervishers.

The next minute, they knew, would uncover the real brand upon Lefty Merker, so quietly, almost carelessly, the cluster of men drifted away from the immediate vicinity of Lefty Merker and Rangy Pete.

"I'm a waitin' fer your answer, Lefty," Rangy Pete went on, while his eyes never left the face of Lefty Merker. "My ears ain't allus tellin' me the truth, so I'm wanting that you should ease my mind. Did I hear you say something reflectin' about me, Lefty, er didn't I? That's right. Take your time to think it over. They ain't no hurry. They's many a man said words what he's repentin' about now to the angels. Was you thinkin' of taking a long trip, Lefty?"

Lefty Merker's shifty eyes flamed, but his hands did not move. He knew the folly of moving either hand, except for the direct purpose of reaching for the gun at his side. Yet it would be an even break. His hands were as near his gun as were Rangy Pete's. Still, there were those stories which he had heard about Rangy's speed with the six-gun. There were also those curious eyes looking him over so coolly. But Lefty Merker was not the type to fight on an even break. All he asked was a sure thing.

"No, you didn't hear me say nothing about you at all," Lefty Merker spoke grudgingly. "I's talking to Tony Burke. They wasn't anything you could do. You had a man over you with a six—"

"That's what I thought I heard you say, Lefty, an' I'm sorta glad fer you that you didn't say nothin' else. Now you can slope it out of sight."

Lefty Merker followed the suggestion, but the expression of his shifty features carried with it no promise of peace for the future.

"Why you wanta go pickin' a row with him?" Ike Collander asked querulously. "Ain't we got enough trouble without that?"

"What you meanin' by *we*? You ain't never had no trouble that I ain't hadda get you out of. But you're standing around yammering like you allus do, 'stead of getting a posse ready to chase them Dervishers. I s'pose you'll leave it all to Rough House Dan."

Ike Collander, as well as the rest of Triple Butte, did appear inclined to leave it to Merrill. And Rangy Pete, in spite of his suggestion, proved even more disposed than the others to trust the question of retribution to the riders from the Snaky Y.

Tony Burke dashed from his saloon with the excited announcement that his faro funds had been looted, and he found Rangy Pete standing in the roadway still arguing about the effects of the Dervishers' visit to Triple Butte and the wisdom of pursuit.

"They's some'll say it won't do us no good to be put on the map by the Dervishers," he heard Rangy holding forth, "but I ain't got such a narrow-lookin' view of things as that. They ain't a town in two states but what'll hear Triple Butte's been held up by Wild Dick. Yeah, Buck Menzie, I know they'll laugh. They couldn't do nothin' else if they'd a seen your paws trying to pick the shingles offen Tony's roof, but I ain't a thinkin' of that. An' they won't be, neither, after they get through laughin'. They'll be thinking Triple Butte must be some long-horn or they wouldn't be no band of Dervishers coming down here trying to slip their brand on us. Yeah, Buck, it'll do us a lot of good, an' that's why I'm sayin' we should be sorta grateful to Dick and not send no posse after him. 'Sides, if a posse did go out, I'm thinkin' Triple Butte'd be some less populous afore they got through their target practice —"

"You ain't lost nothing. That's the reason you talk that way," Tony Burke broke into the harangue. "Me, I lost —"

"Sure you lost something, Tony, but go on and ease your mind about it," Rangy returned coolly. "'Tain't polite to stop thattaway in the middle of the street. You musta lost a lot, Tony, 'cause you been tellin' us all-long you never made no money outa faro. But that don't matter, Tony. Go on and tell us all about it. We got a sorta sympathizin' heart today, an' they ain't no sayin' but what we might bust out and weep on yore shoulder. I wouldn't hanker fer Dan Merrill to find me weepin' on yore neck, Tony, but don't think of me when you got something sobby to talk about."

Tony Burke's hasty retreat was the only indication that he intended to withhold the story of his financial losses, and the laugh which followed his withdrawal from the scene told Rangy Pete that the temporarily aroused spirit of Triple Butte was already sinking back into its customary lethargy. Just now lethargy in Triple Butte was what he wanted, though under ordinary conditions he would have been among the first to stir up a posse for a half-day's amusement chasing the Dervishers. There would have been sufficient sport and chance in that to make it well worth the effort, but as Rangy Pete turned about in the roadway and eyed the approaching dust cloud which enveloped the riders from the Snaky Y,

he told himself that conditions were quite out of the ordinary. Assuredly they were far from the ordinary. For though he had heard much about road agents, and had caught a few personal glimpses of these inconsiderate gentlemen, he had never before heard of a band which left any portion of its work to a blue-eyed rider with a girlish chin and lips. Any pursuit on the part of Triple Butte would doubtless lead to indiscriminate shooting, and bullets, Rangy had observed, have no more respect for blue-eyed riders than for black-bearded ones.

Rangy Pete was somewhat astonished at this new touch of sentiment, but he could not quite down it as he stood in the roadway and watched the progress of the dust cloud. No, the only thing he could do would be to delay the pursuit of the Snaky Y punchers as long as possible; divert their attention, if possible, and give the band of bandits with the blue-eyed mascot an opportunity to vanish into the hills, or into the chaparral, or wherever else they felt most like vanishing. Then, after they had vanished, there was just a chance that he might drift along in the same direction, alone, of course, and with the sole objective of determining whether or not the balance of that particular rider's face was as attractive as the blue eyes and the round chin.

"What you moonin' about? You can't put nothing over me," a voice interrupted Rangy's thoughts. "I know why you ain't so dog-fired keen

to be slopin' out after the Dervishers. It ain't 'cause you ain't lost nothing, 'cause you never had nothing to lose, and you allus been the first to wanta go chasing such folks out of a peaceful life."

Rangy Pete carefully eyed the individual at his side. Then he looked just as carefully about him, and discovered that the rest of Triple Butte was interested entirely in the riders from the Snaky Y.

"Ike," Rangy returned severely, "you got a tongue in your head, an' you reached the discriminatin' years of most-nigh forty, but you ain't learned yet what a tongue's for. They's been more people hung by the tongue than any other way I know about. Now you been warned, Ike, so if you wanta stick out yore tongue and lap it about yore neck, jest go ahead and don't mind me."

Ike Collander leered with a daring born of friendship, and in a manner which would have made Lefty Merker envious.

"I ain't gonna say nothing what'll make you sorry for yourself afterwards," Ike replied, as he began the retreat to the "General Purpus" store, "but I got eyes in my head and I seen the same thing you seen, and that sure was a purty chin —"

Rangy Pete picked up a pebble from the highway and hurled it in the direction of Ike Collander, then he turned about in time to avoid being run down by the foremost rider from the Snaky Y. That rider was Dan Merrill, big, broad and swarthy,

burned by the sun and evidently by his passions, with a cold, fearless eye, a ready gun at his belt, and with a voice which did not hesitate to proclaim its owner's wants.

"Set 'em up, Tony, and make 'em high and long," Merrill bellowed from the doorway of the saloon, as a troop of a dozen riders slithered to a halt behind him.

Rangy Pete waited until the thirsty cavalcade had made its way through the doorway, then he followed in the same direction. He arrived in time to find Dan Merrill and his punchers surveying a scene of liquid confusion. On other occasions Rangy had viewed the waste spaces left in the wake of too eager roisterers, but he had never before seen any work quite so complete as that which had been done by the Dervishers. The floor was a litter of broken glasses and "dead soldiers," while the sawdust which was sprinkled about to give courage to wavering feet was a guttering mess of flowing liquor, and the wonderful array of enlivening cheer which had stood so conveniently within the reach of Lefty Merker's right hand was nothing but a blank of desolation.

"What you been doing, Tony?" Merrill roared, when his first astonishment gave place to words. "Don't you know this isn't the place to break in cayuses?"

"Cayuses?" Tony Burke roared in reply. "They's

been something here worse'n cayuses. The Dervishers was here not a half hour ago. They got all my faro money, and if you got any heart, Dan, you'll go get 'em for me."

Merrill swaggered slightly as he turned about to his band of punchers who had suddenly become grim-faced.

"What you say, boys? We get 'em?"

"We rope 'em by the neck," replied Bill Sonnes, who came as near as any man ever did to dominating that band of hard-riding, hard-drinking punchers from the Snaky Y. "We come to town for a bit of sport. We might's well get it bumping off Dervishers as any other way."

"Which way'd they go?" Merrill demanded.

"Took the trail towards the Double K," Burke informed, "but they'd branch at the Little Forks and hit for the buttes. Ain't that about it, Rangy Pete?"

"They sure ain't loco enough to ride the Double K trail far, 'cause I know the Double K boys most well's I know you Snaky Y buckos, and they'd just naturally pump a whole lot of lead after Dervisher Dick if they ever set eyes on him," Rangy Pete replied in reflective manner; "and I'm sorta thinkin' it ain't such awful tough luck for you buckos that they do keep clear of the Double K. Them Double K boys is most awful permiskuous with lead, and I'm hearin' they ain't forgot how Bill Sonnes downed

Baldy Tipper the other day. They're sorta hintin' that Baldy got it from the side, 'stead of lookin' it straight in the face."

A silence fell over Tony Burke's saloon.

Rangy Pete was leaning easily against the bar, and Bill Sonnes was conveniently placed less than ten feet distant. The puncher's eyes grew ominous at the words, but when his swift glance took in the fact that Rangy's hands were hanging limply at his sides, he permitted his expression to change and he broke out into a loud laugh.

"Mr. Judge Pete, since you wanta ride me thatta-way, I'm tellin' you that Baldy dodged and that's why he got it in the side. But I ain't gonna tell them Double K boys. They can go on thinkin' what they wanta think, and whenever they want Bill Sonnes he won't be hangin' back none from obligin'."

"That's awful polite of you, Bill," Rangy Pete declared. "With them kind words I'm thinkin' I'll throw a saddle on my cayuse after a while and fly down to the Double K with a sprig of olive in my teeth. Now if it's all the same to you, I'll be slippin' behind the bar to help Lefty Merker set 'em up. Lefty got a scare a few minutes ago and he's apt to break things 'less he gets some help."

Rangy Pete assisted at the liquidating ceremony, and he assisted so freely and readily that the Snaky Y punchers could hardly place an emptied glass upon the bar before it was brimming again.

"They ain't no use holdin' back, boys," Rangy encouraged. "This here is on the house, 'cause Tony's gonna say it is after a while. Rummy Lister should be doin' this, but he gotta scare, too, an' he's summers back behind nursing a grouch. It ain't no fun stickin' your paws in the air fer fifteen minutes while a gun's lookin' you between the eyes and askin' fer business. Rummy sorta lost his angora, but he'll be right fit tomorrow."

Dan Merrill seemed oppressed with a new thought, for he suddenly roared out with more bellowing volume than he had yet displayed:

"I'd sorta forgot to ask what all you men was a doing when the Dervishers was here. I don't remember nowise hearin' shots. An' I don't see no wrecks ner no sawbones at work. Was you all standin' with yer paws in the air, Pete?"

"We sure was, Dan," Rangy Pete replied soberly. "I was a reachin' up alla time tryin' to hand Ike Collander's chimbley down to one of them road agents. He sorta seemed to be takin' a hankerin' fer that chimbley, and you know what an obligin' cuss I am. I kept on a reachin' and a reachin' but I didn't get it, Dan. But you shoulda seen the rest. They's a whole dozen of them got both hands up and sayin' 'please, teacher' to a pore little road agent what's tremblin' in his shoes."

Dan Merrill roared with every evidence of delight.

"If that's what happened, boys, we'll let the

Dervishers go," Merrill declared, when he was able to command his voice again. "Triple Butte's some fightin' little town. It's wild hosses all over again, and I ain't gonna take no risks of draggin' my pore boys into no kind of a big fight what Triple Butte'd start. No sir, not me. They don't get me into no world war like that."

Rough House Dan roared with further delight, a portion of which was appreciation of his own vocal effort. He was still mixing laughter with liquor when Tony Burke flared at him.

"That's my lickie you're drinking, Dan Merrill, and I'm asking you to go after them Dervishers. Ain't I been telling you they got my faro layout?"

But Merrill's merriment went unchecked.

"It oughta be worth it to see you fellers sticking yer paws into the air," Merrill declared. "If you'll go out and do it all over again, Tony, I'll foot the bill what the Dervishers run up against that faro joint."

"Yer laughin' too soon, Dan Merrill." Buck Menzie came to the rescue of Tony Burke. "They's such a thing as laughin' at the other side of the face."

"What might you be meanin' by that, Buck?" Merrill demanded, with an abrupt dropping of humor. "If you got something to say, say it, but if you ain't, I'll be pitchin' you out in the dust."

"They lifted something of yours, that's all I

wanta say," Menzie returned. "They took that box of evaporated apples what come in for you on the stage this mornin'."

"Good heavens!" Merrill exclaimed, with a swift glance about his band of punchers, "but you're lyin', Buck."

"Lyin' nothing," Menzie flared. "If you don't think so, ask Rangy Pete. He's standin' right on top of them at the time."

"That right, Pete?" Merrill asked excitedly. "Did the Dervishers get my box of evaporated apples?"

"I would'n wanta say nothin' fer sure about that," Rangy reflected calmly. "I would'n say they was yore apples. But they was a box of 'vaporated apples on Ike Collander's front steps, an' they had on 'em a tag what had yore name on it. That's the box the Dervishers took. Mabbe they's yores, an' mabbe not."

A surprising change came over Dan Merrill. With a few swift words he whipped his men into action. Glasses were hastily put upon the bar with their contents but half consumed, and there was a hurried racing for the horses still standing in the center of the roadway.

Rangy Pete followed to the doorway, and he saw that Dan Merrill, big, swarthy and restless, was already mounted at the head of his band of riders.

"They went the Double K trail?" Merrill demanded again.

"They sure did," Tony Burke called back, as the troop spurred the drooping cayuses into life and swirled down the roadway amid a cloud of dust.

Rangy Pete crossed the road to Ike Collander's steps, and there, with the curious Ike peering through the doorway, he stood and watched the cloud of dust sweeping its way along the trail so recently taken by the Dervishers.

Pete turned about and faced the astonished Ike.

"Ike Collander," he drawled deliberately, "you see what happened? I told you Dan Merrill had a weak spot you could stick a finger through. I been known to wrassel a flock of red-eye in my day, but I'm thankin' my guidin' stars I ain't no 'vaporated apple fiend."

CHAPTER II

THE dust cloud was still large in the immediate line of vision when Rangy Pete was seized with an idea.

"Ike, what you standin' there gapin' at?" he demanded. "Why ain't you out in the corral throwin' the saddles on our cayuses? And while you're about it, you might's well roll up a tote of flour and a few swabs of bacon. We mayn't be back for two-three days."

"We mayn't, eh?" Ike Collander leered from the doorway. "You got your grammar most awful mixed up. You mayn't come back forever fer all I care; but me, I'm back already. 'Cause I ain't goin' nowhere with you."

"Ike," Rangy Pete began severely.

"Don't Ike me," the small person roared out, "fer I ain't a gonna go. I got a store to look after. 'Sides you ain't a gonna burn the hide offen me by ridin' over to the buttes."

Rangy Pete considered the rebellious Ike from the tips of his toes to the scraggly fringe of his hair. Then he shook his head sorrowfully.

"They ain't no punch in you no more, Ike," he declared. "Times ain't what they once used to be."

You ain't no kind of a pal, when you go throwin' me down thisaway. But I'm thinkin' you're right, Ike. They wouldn't be no way to get you acrost to the buttes. You'd just naturally fry up and run out the toes of your shoes afore we got half way there. But that ain't gonna keep you from throwin' that tote of grub together; and see't you don't let the hoss flies roost on that sign I been paintin' while I'm gone. They ain't nothin' quite so bad as hoss flies to muss up red paint, and you'd a knowed that, Ike, if you hadn't been thinking so much about your miserable ole hide. You otta know things like that, Ike, er you ain't never gonna be no prominent citizen of Triple Butte. An' don't talk so much while I'm away. If they's anybody I don't like, it's a person like you, Ike, what's alla time runnin' about with his tongue flappin' in the air."

Ike Collander, from the entrance to a flour barrel, made certain spluttering sounds which brought a fresh grin to Rangy Pete's lips. In that, Rangy appeared to recognize a familiar sound, for he promptly ambled into the store and crossed to the vicinity of the flour barrel and the stock of bacon.

"Atta boy, Ike, lemme do the work now," Rangy pleaded. "I ain't a gonna have you doin' alla work around here. I don't see why you ain't fired me long ago, Ike, an' you woulda if you hadn't got such a kind and lovin' heart. But, Ike, you got the patience of a long-lost, errin' father a mournin' fer a model

son. Now if you'll pull your head outa that flour barrel and let sumbody work, little Pete'll be hittin' the trail about as soon's you got that cayuse saddled."

But Ike Collander, it appeared, was past the breaking point of exasperation. He emerged from the flour barrel white and bristling. He attempted some sputtering words, but failing entirely in this purpose, he hurled a tin of canned goods in the direction of Rangy Pete's head. The latter dodged, and the tin landed, with disastrous effects, in the middle of a neat array of bottled essences lining the wall.

"There you go again, ruinin' all my goods." Rangy spoke with a peevish tone. "Ain't I told you afore 'at canned goods is to eat and not to go smashin' no bottles with?"

But Ike Collander had retreated with his wrath in the general direction of Tony Burke's bar, and outside the saloon he found some half dozen citizens already mounted and ready to follow the same trail taken by the riders from the Snaky Y. A moment later Rangy Pete led his cayuse from the corral, and any one who had been in the least inclined to make observations would have noted that, while the others were ready for light riding, Rangy had his saddle-bags well filled. But no one seemed to notice Rangy's condition.

"Gonna join us, Pete?" Buck Menzie demanded.

"Mabbe so, and mabbe not. Depends on which way your hoss's tail is pointin'. If it's pointin' straight towards the noise of battle and stickin' out like a hoss a lopin', I'm with you, Buck. An' I'm thinkin' that's the way you'll be ridin', 'cause I sorta remember seein' your hands a clawing higher into the air nor anybody else's."

Buck Menzie did his utmost towards the tinting of the atmosphere with words, but Rangy Pete only grinned and remained leaning against a hitching post while the Triple Butte posse spurred off in the direction taken by the Dervishers and then by the riders from the Snaky Y.

Rangy Pete mounted, then turned about and saw Ike Collander standing in the saloon doorway. There was a marked wistfulness in Ike's simple features, and Ike's eyes, which shortly before had been glistening with anger, traveled meaningly in the direction of the Collander corral. Ike, it was plain, had a hankering to follow whatever trail might be set by Rangy Pete, and that despite any previous words to the contrary.

"Ike, I'm surprised at you," Rangy reflected aloud. "What's that I'm seein' in your hand? You don't mean to say you're smoochin' some red-eye. Well now, I'll have to be speakin' to the gospel boy about you, Ike. I'll tell him when I lope past the tent that you're a lost heathen and that you're a needin' his saving tongue. Just you stand thattaway

till he gets here, Ike, an' you'll be a changed man by the time I get back."

Ike's barometrical wistfulness swung back to exasperation, and Rangy Pete, seeing this, eased his cayuse into a lope and set out along the trail which had just been traveled by the posse of Triple Butte.

"Poor Ike," Rangy reflected, as he rode along. "There's only one way to make Ike stay at home, and that's to get him bristling about the neck. And what I'm gonna do ain't no trail for Ike to ride."

In time he reached Little Forks, the branch in the trail forced by the outjutting of a spur from one of those far-off buttes which stood out against the sky, dun and jagged and saw-toothed, and uninviting now in the gray sunlight.

Little Forks was a name only. It carried with it no suggestion of a structure of any sort, and it might be said to be the border line, drawn by some imaginary law of the plains and the buttes and separating those two forces of mankind. On the one hand were the hard-bitten, keen-eyed riders of the sage lands; on the other hand were the lawless riders, the Dervisher Dicks, who were always a law unto themselves.

At Little Forks Rangy Pete paused to study the trail before him, and almost instantly the keenness of his eye picked out that which he had hoped to sec.

Rangy's years upon the plains had taught him

something about the futility of these mad dashes into the butte lands with punitive mind fixed upon road agents such as the Dervishers. Merrill, he knew, would appreciate the same, once the preliminary of his strange fit of anger wore away. For the Dervishers had ways of their own of evading frantic pursuits such as the riders from the Snaky Y were at this moment leading far to the west. The method was simple in its effectiveness, and it was nothing less than scattering as a flock of birds will sometimes scatter.

Sooner or later, Rangy Pete knew, the Dervisher riders would drift away one by one from the main body; they would hide in the chaparral until the heat of the pursuit lashed by, then they would calmly ride back the way they had come, seeking refuge in that tangle of draws and hills which went to make up the fringe of the butte land.

That would be the Dervisher system for melting away into nothingness. Rangy had known it long before he saw this lone trail of hoofprints pointing towards him and coming from out that tide of pursuit.

One of the Dervishers had already doubled back upon the trail, and the rider, he could see, had swung down towards the Double K ranch.

Rangy Pete chuckled to himself softly. The story of that single rider was as plain to him as the signs of the sky.

One rider had swung back, seeking refuge in the buttes — one rider, the first. And who would be the first of the Dervishers to be given the opportunity for freedom?

“Blue Eyes,” Rangy confided to himself. “There never was a surer guess in the world. Now all I have to do is to follow your trail, Blue Eyes, until I catch up with you, and then —”

Rangy paused just there. To be quite frank with himself, his mind was not entirely clear as to just how that sentence could be finished. His brain was equally vague as to what had prompted him into this strange expedition instead of riding madly along the trail as the Snaky Y punchers and the Triple Butte posse were doing. It was something foreign which had touched his emotions. Perhaps it was the sparkle of those blue eyes; perhaps it was the trim dignity of the figure which had stood guard over him; perhaps it was the conviction that the girl's last recognition of him had been a taunt; but however unplaced might be the purpose in his mind, Rangy Pete knew he would ride the course of Blue Eyes until he found her, or until he knew pursuit to be hopeless.

And here before him was her trail.

He was still chuckling softly to himself when from behind him there came the startling sound of a voice.

“Hey, you old fly-bitten maverick, what you doing there?”

Rangy Pete turned about methodically. There were only two classes of people who would take such liberties with his nomenclature. It would be an enemy who would have him properly covered, or it would be one of the riders from the Double K. As he turned, Rangy caught sight of a rider sitting his horse in lazy fashion by the edge of the chaparral.

"Hello, you old dog-eared pinto," he greeted in return. "Have you seen anybody ride this way, Jumbo?"

"Sure," that individual informed. "About a half hour ago I saw a rider loping it for the Lone Shadow butte down towards the Double K."

"What'd he look like?" Rangy pressed.

"Go on and ask me, Rangy. I didn't see anything but his back at a half mile range, so what do you expect?"

Rangy Pete nodded reflectively. This situation was really gratifying after all. For it had not been a part of his intentions that his knowledge of the lady bandit should be shared even by as good a friend as Jumbo Irish of the Double K ranch. Still, his presence at Little Forks demanded an explanation.

"Did you see a whole army go charging past here a while ago, Jumbo?" he asked casually, as his glance drifted down towards the Lone Shadow butte.

"All I saw was their smoke. That's what made me drift up along this way. What's happened to the world, Rangy?"

"Nothing at all," Rangy considered, "nothing except that Triple Butte got itself put on the map this afternoon. A person by the name of Dervisher Dick done the trick. Funny how it happened. It's 'cause he stole some 'vaporated apples that Dan Merrill and the whole Snaky Y crew are burning up the trail at this minute."

Rangy's remarks were greeted by laughter which did not attempt to conceal its impoliteness. That laughter, containing as it did the full, rich taunts of friendship, necessitated an elaboration of facts on the part of Rangy Pete.

"So you see," he informed sagely, at the conclusion, "that person you saw hitting for the Lone Shadow butte must have been a Dervisher, and, Jumbo Irish, that's what dragged me away from my cozy home. I'm out on the lone, bagging Dervishers."

"And I'm with you," Jumbo informed with startling suddenness. "We'll sure camp on his trail till he thinks we growed there."

Under other conditions the association of Jumbo Irish would have been a welcome thing to Rangy Pete; but just now, with this little prompting in his brain which he had not quite solved, association of any kind would be an encumbrance. Jumbo simply must be disposed of in some manner or other. For a moment he reached up a lean hand and toyed with the tip of his left ear. Then abruptly he grinned broadly.

"I'm thinking it wouldn't be nowise fair, Jumbo, for two great big buckos like you and me to set out after one little Dervisher," he deliberated aloud, "and there wouldn't be any fun in that anyhow. Whyn't you get a Dervisher of your own?"

The suggestion, it became obvious, was not without its appeal to Jumbo Irish. Still, he had a doubt to express.

"Where do I get him?" he demanded.

"Where I got this one." Rangy continued to grin. "We follow the trail till we find where another Dervisher sloped it away; then you can take him, and I'll take this one."

Enthusiasm suddenly glowed from the eyes of the Double K puncher.

"You betcha," he declared, "and I'll lay you down a stack of yellow boys that I romp my Dervisher into Triple Butte before you get yours there. Say, but won't it sort of set Triple Butte on the ear when we mooch in there with our little Dervishers?"

To Rangy Pete, a wager on the success of his expedition against Blue Eyes was hardly in conformity with those restless thoughts in the back of his brain; but now, with Jumbo's keen eyes upon him, it had become a necessity.

"Sure, Jumbo," he conceded, "make it fifty yellow boys that I get my Dervisher into Triple Butte before you land yours there. Now we'd better

be looking about for the place where yours left the trail."

Side by side they cantered up the dust-churned trail, and a half mile from Little Forks the air was suddenly startled by Jumbo Irish's mocking laughter.

"I ain't saying that I believed that evaporated apple story when you told it, Rangy," he rounded out his laughter with an explanation, "and I don't believe a word of it now. For ain't that pieces of evaporated apple scattered along the trail?"

Observation compelled Rangy to admit the accuracy of Jumbo's charges. Continued study of the trail revealed the fact that for a space of a quarter of a mile or more there were small fragments of evaporated apples strewn along the route and trampled into the dust by the lashing feet of many horses. Eventually, there was the discarded box, empty and cast by the trail side.

Rangy Pete jerked his horse to a halt.

"Funny, ain't it?" he demanded. "Here the Dervishers raid Triple Butte and steal Merrill's 'vaporated apples, and Merrill don't take no worry at all about what they do to Triple Butte until he hears that they've been stealing his apples. Then he sort of goes into a tantrum; and now we find these apples a-decorating the trail —"

Though Rangy glanced rather helplessly at his companion, Jumbo's only answer was a gesture of impatience.

A half mile farther on they discovered the point in the trail where the second rider had slipped away from the pursuit and had made almost directly across the chaparral-strewn plains for the mouth of the Pelican draw.

"Now you got your boy, I'm thinking we'll be meeting farther on," Rangy commented.

Jumbo Irish nodded swiftly.

"Mabbe so," he admitted. "I know the Pelican runs into the Lone Shadow draw about ten-fifteen miles up the buttes, but, Rangy, I don't aim to let my Dervisher get that far. S'long, Rangy. Meet me in Triple Butte, and have that fifty smackers ready to hand over to me."

With scant ceremony Jumbo Irish vanished among the chaparral, and as he disappeared among the solemn gray shadows of the plains, Rangy once more chuckled to himself softly. For the way had been cleared for the swift and silent pursuit of Blue Eyes.

Swiftly, with a single gesture of the arm, Rangy swung the burnt-yellow cayuse about in the trail and he urged the animal into its long, measured lope directly across the chaparral-tangled plains for the mouth of the Lone Shadow draw. And as he rode silently he found himself pondering those hidden lures of the girl's features; he found himself wondering just what would be the full cast of her countenance when that disfiguring mask was withdrawn

and shortly he caught himself up sharply with a muttered exclamation. For Rangy Pete had discovered that he was smiling to himself at the prospect of the future.

CHAPTER III

RANGY PETE knew this Lone Shadow draw by heart, as far as its juncture with the Pelican. He knew, as well, that there were several butte land ravines drawing in and converging upon The Pass — that cut in the higher buttes which marked the border between the bleakness of the sun-burned rocks and the fringes of the forested hills beyond.

Beyond the Pass, he knew, there was a strangely tumbled land of hills and gorges, forested valleys and bare mountain peaks, which, for all he could say, stretched on to the rim of the world. It was in that confusion of hills and valleys that the Dervishers made their home, and for a time, as Rangy thought of the possibility of the blue-eyed one finding refuge there and becoming lost to his sight forever, he spurred the yellow cayuse into swifter pace.

That had been in the early afternoon, but now, with the cool shadows about him, he knew that his earlier haste had been waste effort.

For there before him, just a few hundred yards distant, was a tiny pin-point of light cutting its way through the gloom of night. Some person was camping in the draw, by the spring, with all confidence and security, and even at this distance he

could smell the pungent odor of smoke which drifted lazily down towards him.

Rangy hid the cayuse behind a boulder and began to crawl forward upon hands and knees.

Dead smoke upon the air. The lingering flavor of coffee and bacon. Some person camped by the spring, and taking no precautions whatever!

That, of course, would be like the daring of Blue Eyes.

For a time, as he stole forward through the darkness, Rangy felt a new and unknown pounding of the blood in his veins.

Then shortly he came to a boulder which lay between him and the pin-pricking of light. For a time he peered beyond the edge of rock, but he could see nothing except the wavering of shadows. At length he felt his way silently to the top of the boulder, but the only distinct vision which greeted his eye was the smouldering embers of a dying campfire. Quite plainly, the object of his pursuit was not present.

Shortly he heard the shuffling of restless feet. The Dervisher was returning from a point farther up the trail.

In that instant Rangy found himself wondering just how the capture of Blue Eyes, the bandit, was to be accomplished. If only she would throw more chips upon the fire. But no. She seated herself calmly, with back towards him, contemplating the smouldering coals.

Blue Eyes twenty feet from him now, and quite unaware of his presence! Yet the position was a difficult one. It might even become embarrassing.

The bandit shifted, sat erect, glanced about over the right shoulder, as a restless animal will sometimes do when it scents the presence of some alien element. Quite plainly the road agent was becoming ill at ease. Rangy's presence doubtless had conveyed some message to the other through one of the submerged senses called instinct.

Yet in the slow turning of the head which was followed by a careful scrutiny in all directions, Rangy failed to catch even a dim view of the person's profile. The shadows were too deep for that; the dying coals were wrongly placed. The whole situation was wrong. It was becoming uncomfortable, mentally as well as physically. He could not wait for the morning light to give him a full view of Blue-Eyes' face, even if this jagged rock were not already eating into his bones.

"No, Mr. Lady, they's only one way to make this round up," Rangy informed himself in his characteristic style. "It shore ain't gonna be none polite fer me, ner dignified fer you, but if you had'n been so plumb foolish about wearin' that eye-blanket back in Triple Butte, this most mabbe wouldn't a happened. Rangy Pete, yer jest doin' it to shake off what that Methody fellow called the illusions. It's most likely gonna be them apples he talked

about what turned to ashes in the mouth. When you lay eyes to her, she'll be a double-crossed rip ringer; them blue eyes most likely squints, an' if she's got much of that yeller hair what you seen, she'll look worse'n that cayuse. 'Sides, I'm bettin' she's got a tongue what'll make you crawl, an' if she ain't got a kick like a pinto, Rangy, you owe yoreself about a few drinks when you get back to Tony Burke's. 'Tween you and me, Pete, they's only one way to make the lady's acquaintance without gettin' some surplus holes punched in yore hide what could do without 'em. So here's lookin' at you—"

Rangy Pete reached back and brought his lariat into more convenient position, and he began to rearrange its folds carefully. It was a twenty-foot throw, but that meant nothing to him, even in the semi-darkness. Still, the work was not enviable. After all, the throwing of a lasso about her shoulders would not be quite the most promising way to renew acquaintance with the blue-eyed rider. If she were all the unpleasant things he had imagined, then the lariat experience would not matter; but if, on that one off-chance —

Rangy played with the lasso for an unnecessary length of time, and while he did so the bandit became more restless still. Now Rangy saw that his proposed victim had partly risen to her feet, had rolled a cigarette and was smoking it freely.

"That ain't quite the thing what a perfect lady

should do, blue-eyed or not," Rangy admonished to himself, "but I s'pose they has been worse habits nor that cured."

With that, Rangy Pete made a dull scraping sound upon the face of the rock, and as the road agent stiffened to listen to the sound the lariat twirled out through the night air and landed in a neat circle over the head. Rangy gave a quick jerk and instantly the person's arms were tightened at the sides and the bandit was as helpless as though looking into the mouths of a half dozen derringers.

Whatever Rangy Pete may have expected from the lone camper, he had not looked for the rigid silence with which his attack was greeted. Beyond a slight straining upon the rope as though to test out if the situation were really true, his victim made no struggle. Assuredly there was no outcry.

"You shore got a level head, purty Blue Eyes," this time Rangy spoke his compliments aloud, "an' afore this little seance goes any farther I'm wantin' to apologize most awful humble fer the sorta impolite way I butted into yore thoughts —"

Rangy paused, to give the other an opportunity to release some of the natural spleen which would attend such a situation. But there was no answer.

"I'm knowin' you must be kinda sore, Blue Eyes, fer this rough and ready way of makin' yore acquaintance, but they wan't no two ways about it. I jest hadda have another peek at you."

Another pause. Still no answer.

"Yer a queer one," Rangy volunteered. "You don't allus keep yore tongue shut up in the corral thattaway, do you? Fer if you do, I ain't a sayin' but what I'd admire you a most awful lot for it. If you got a mad on, jest kinda let it loose. Horn right in an' say what you like. You don't need to mind me none; 'sides, it'll make you feel better —"

Another fruitless pause, though this time there was a slight downward straining at the rope, as though the captive knew of some concealed weapon not far from the finger tips.

Rangy Pete felt that the situation was growing more difficult. It was quite bad enough to have captured a female bandit after she had shared so recently in the holding up of a group of patently respectable citizens, but it was much worse to have that bandit retreat into silence in this manner. With one hand upon the lariat to keep it firm about the other's body, Rangy scrambled down the face of the boulder and so came to earth within a few feet of the captive. The latter's back was turned, but even had the face been towards him Rangy knew that the light from the fire was too dim to permit him to see his prisoner's features. One thing he noticed — this person was tall, taller than he had expected, and of a much more athletic build. Of course it was going to be a case of ashes in the mouth, and after

all he wouldn't lose that wager to himself about the girl having a kick like a pinto.

"They ain't no use standin' there in the sulks," Rangy pleaded. "Now listen, little Blue Eyes, 'cause I wanta tell you something. I got a bet on with a friend of mine what says if I take you into Triple Butte afore he takes his bandit in I win a stack of yellow boys. That shows I ain't got no hard feelin's agin you. It's all 'cause me an' that fool feller made a bet. That's funny, ain't it? Whyn't you laugh, Blue Eyes?"

The captive swung about with a harshness and volume of voice which were astonishing.

"Who the hell are you? And what's that you're talking about bandits?" the voice demanded.

The tone and the undoubted masculinity of the voice came to Rangy Pete with something of a shock, for until their character swept aside all suggestion of femininity it had not occurred to Rangy even remotely that this person could be other than Blue Eyes.

Rangy Pete blinked, but in the darkness the stranger did not observe that.

"I wouldn't go whisperin' thattaway," Rangy returned, when he had recovered from his astonishment. "They ain't nobody within about a few miles, an' they might go hearin' you. People is strange thattaway. They don't know no better'n to go listenin' in on private conversations, an' some

people is foolish enough to go yammerin' their heads off about what they hear. F'rinstance, I would'n want anybody to know 'at you didn't like the feel of a rope about you. It might sorta create the wrong idea that you have one of them natural hostilities to bein' hung — ”

“Who are you, and what do you mean by horning in on my affairs in this way?” the stranger demanded, with equal vigor, though with modified voice. “If you are a road agent, go ahead and rob me and get it over, but for Heaven's sake take this rope off me.”

“Yeah, there you go, callin' this li'l boy a road agent,” Rangy returned with aggrieved voice, “an' seein' 'at you give me the name I might's well get what credit's comin' to me. If you don't mind standin' still, Stranger, I'll sorta disencumber you of that flock of hardware what you're wearin' so permiskuous like.”

With that, Rangy Pete advanced cautiously upon the stranger, and while the other stood perfectly still he removed a fine assortment of arms.

“Yeah, momma's innocent li'l pet should'n be runnin' around the woods thisaway,” Rangy reflected as he examined his winnings. “He ain't got nothin' to take care of hisself none, an' when a great big bucko puncher comes along — ”

“Are you going to tell me what you mean by this outrage, or are you going to sit there all night like a kid?” the stranger insisted.

"Shore, don't mind me, Mr. Road Agent. Go right on sayin' things to make me feel special friendly. I'm that soft-hearted, I'm most shore to bust out a weepin' soon. This li'l boy can't stand no sech kind words, Mister — "

"What do you mean by calling me a road agent?" the irate one interrupted, quite overlooking Rangy's mood.

"You don't mean to say 'at you ain't one," Rangy asked, with apparent surprise, and with his slurring drawl uppermost. "Now ain't that jest the funniest thing alive? But I'm gonna tell you somethin' funnier nor that, Mister. You jest pack yoreself atop of that saddle sorta half comfortable like, an' listen while I tells you a sorrerful tale. They's a pore li'l town out here a ways what's got the name Triple Butte tacked onto it tighter'n a brandin' iron could put it there. They's nothin' but peaceful citizens in Triple Butte; wouldn't never shoot up a person 'less jest fer a little bit of fun. They's so nice and tender they's got a gospel boy there jest holdin' open the pearly gates fer 'em all to walk in. An' then this afternoon, you wouldn' believe it, Mister, but they's a great big bunch of road agents comes in an' steals all Dan Merrill's 'vaporated apples. It's a hard world, Mister — "

"Fool," the stranger inserted his personal opinion of Rangy Pete. "What's all that got to do with me? And what do you mean by coming out to my camp

and holding me up in this way? If you'll just give me back one of my guns for about thirty seconds I'll fill your hide so full of lead it'll pay to melt you down."

"Now that's what I calls right obligin'," Rangy declared warmly. "An' any time I gets that han-kerin' feelin' fer lead, Mr. Stranger, I'll be lopin' along yore way. But since this here conversation's gettin' personal, I might's well tell you, Stranger, 'at while I had my hands a pawin' the air back there in Triple Butte, I's usin' these holes in my head what's called eyes. It got my eyes so set on yore hoss and yore funny duds, Mister, 'at I could'n never forget 'em nohow. That's how I come to be traipsin' out here after you."

Silence for a moment.

"Well, what you going to do about it? Take me back to Triple Butte? Since the time is past for bluffing, I may as well tell you, you long-shanked puncher, that if you have any respect for what's inside that hide of yours, you'll think about a dozen times before you take me to Triple Butte."

"I can't think no dozen times all to onct, 'cause when they built me they put all the quick spots in my fingers," Rangy replied. "So if it's alla same to you, Stranger, you might throw a little 'lumination on the scene."

"What I mean is that if you take me to Triple Butte or to any other place, there'll be such an

epidemic of grave-digging that you'll wish you never heard of me."

"I'm wishin' that already, Mister. An' won't it be some consolin' to you to know you'll hit the bottom of the first grave if them Dervisher pals of yours starts any fun?"

"Touch me, and they'll shoot up the whole town," the man returned obstinately.

Rangy Pete appeared to be reflecting upon the value of the stranger's words, and he sat in silence for the time it took him to smoke the half of a cigarette.

"I'm not sayin' we could'n reach a dicker, Stranger," he replied at length. "Jest prick up yore ears now an' tell me if you didn't hear me a callin' you Blue Eyes a few minutes ago?"

"Certainly I heard you, and I thought you just as crazy then as I think you are now. What do you mean by Blue Eyes?"

"I gotta confess, Stranger, 'at I been lyin' to you. You ain't the Dervisher what I picked out back there in Triple Butte, though this's most confidential like. If you ain't willin' to take it confidential, jest you yammer now afore it's too late — that bein' the case, if I ever hears 'at you ain't been treatin' this conversation confidential, I'll come a gunnin' yore way. Now, Mr. Man, I'm a gonna ask it straight. Is there, or isn't there a woman a riding with yore pack?"

"None of your damned business," the bandit flared.

"Thank you for tellin' me they is a lady," Rangy Pete returned imperturbably. "Now, seein' 'at they's a lady in the pack, the next thing is this. Has she made ample provisions to escape?"

"Again none of your — "

"I ain't hankerin' none to hear that impolite word the second time," Rangy inserted a protesting voice. "Since you been tellin' me the lady had her plans all set for leaving the pack, where'd you say she was gonna slope it?"

The captive loosened upon the air an assortment of explosive objurgations which caused even Rangy Pete to sit back in astonishment, and in the end he assigned Rangy to the hottest place which the imagination of the ancients was able to conjure. Then, literally speaking, he closed the door upon Rangy and turned his back.

Rangy contemplated that back for a moment while he toyed with the tip of his left ear.

"I shore gotta admire yore flow of words, Mister, if that's what yer biddin' for," he resumed. "I ain't noways stingy with my compliments, so I'm gonna say 'at if you'd set up a school summers to teach cowpunchers how to swear, you would'n have to be no road agent no more."

The stranger's back merely shrugged.

Abruptly Rangy's eyes centered upon the rope

turned about the bandit's body, and immediately his fingers came away from the tip of his ear and a grin came to his lips. Rangy remained silent while the grin had its way, then he continued:

"I'm not sayin', Stranger, but what yore back's a hull lot less hurtful to the eyes than yore face, but I'd shore like most awful well to have you swing yore face about so's I can yammer at it."

Another shrug of the shoulders.

Rangy promptly gave a side jerk at the lariat and the captive spun about like a top.

"Say, Mister, they ain't no use crawlin' back in yore shell thattaway," Rangy protested, but this time some of the idleness had left his voice and in its place had come a firmness which even a road agent must recognize as worthy of respect. "You ain't been nowise polite to me, but I'm tryin' to remember 'at a puncher's moreuva gent nor a bandit. Now, comin' down to tacks, you heard me say a minute ago 'at we might make a dicker."

There was something in Rangy Pete's tones which commanded an answer.

"What is it?" the road agent demanded. "We aren't in the habit of making dickers with people we meet."

"They shore ain't nothin' like gettin' new experiences," Rangy confided, "but the dicker's this. They's been a blue-eyed lady a ridin' with yore pack of bandits, an' I wanta know where she's

hangin' out about this minute. You can tell me if you like, an' if you don't like, you can have as much time as you want, up to five minutes, to patter yore prayers. That's what I calls a fair dicker. Youse got a chance to tell a gent what he wants to know, er youse got a chance to flock on ahead and see if it's all true what that Methody gospel boy's been a sayin' down to the tent."

The road agent laughed harshly and again informed Rangy Pete that he would see him in a warmer climate before he would give the information.

"Seein' as you've mentioned the place, I'm guessin' that's where you will be hikin'," Rangy returned, quite unmoved. "The five minutes starts right now. I ain't got no time-piece on me, so I'll jest count 'em out when I think the minutes is up. When I says 'five', if yore tongue ain't started to flap in the right direction, then that's a li'l tip to me 'at I can lay in an' get busy. One."

"How you going to get busy?" the bandit demanded, with some show of interest.

"Now I should'n go to givin' away no secrets. That's a li'l s'prise I got waitin' fer you. Jest let li'l pet be patient, an' he'll get what daddy's got waitin' fer him. Two. Three."

The minutes were ticking off with alarming speed, with much greater speed than actual facts would justify, but Rangy Pete was more intent upon impression than upon fact.

"Four," he called abruptly.

The bandit's eyes quivered slightly, but that was the only indication he gave that he was accepting the situation seriously.

"Five," Rangy boomed some fifteen seconds later. "They ain't no use delayin' a good deed."

Rangy stepped forward sharply, and immediately began to spin the bandit about, coiling the rope around his victim with each twirl of the body. Then he caught the spinning body, steadied it, knotted the rope, faced the man down the draw, and commanded,

"March, pronto. I'll be lopin' along right behind, so —"

"What do you mean by this outrage?" the bandit stormed, as he began to follow Rangy's orders.

"Nothin' serious nohow," Rangy informed, as they tramped along through the darkness. "I got a funny little yeller cayuse down the draw a ways. He's got the queerest little trick you ever heard of. Some punchers musta taught him. Whenever they uses him fer lynchin's, fer drawin' the body up, you know, he seems to think it's fun to ease back a bit when the swingin' party begins to kick. That lets said party's toes jest touch the ground, an' he shore is a long time a kickin' off. You'd be s'prised, Stranger, how that li'l yeller cayuse seems to know jest how much to ease back. He sorter keeps it goin' back and forth, see-saw like, an' he does it so

long 'at I'm wonderin' if he don't get more fun outuv it ner anybody else — ”

“What's all that got to do with me?” the bandit insisted.

“What's 'at got to do with you? Oh, yes. Funny, ain't it, 'at I'd fergot to tell you before? Yeller cayuse ain't had no practice fer a long time now, an' I'm jest a goin' to see if he's forgot the trick. You'd shore admire to see it yoreself, Mister, only I don't see how it could be fixed up to give you a special seat, seein' they's only the two of us, an' seein' 'at I jest gotta test out yeller cayuse myself. Funny I didn't think of it afore, Stranger, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I won't put no bandage on yore eyes when cayuse pulls you up, an' I'll build a bonfire so's you can see how yeller cayuse does the trick. You shore will admire li'l yeller boy. He's the most human lynchin' cow-pony I ever run acrost. You see, Stranger, we does it this way. We ties the swingin' party up jest like yer tied up now. Then we finds a cottonwood with a big branch a stickin' out. They's one down the draw here a ways what you'd think had been made spechully fer accommodatin' said cantankerus parties what needs lynchin'. But what I's gonna say is that we ties up said party, throws a rope around his neck, throws t'other end over the branch, ties it to the cayuse's saddle, an' then speaks sorta gentle to the cayuse, kind as though we wanted him to draw easy an'

not make no quick job of it. But you will see how li'l yellor cayuse does it. I'll build the fire right clost, an' then I'll stand ahind you so's to keep yore eyes turned towards cayuse — kinda keep you from swingin' — ”

Rangy Pete stopped and he appeared to ponder through the night. Then, a moment later, as he urged his captive forward, he resumed:

“It kinda bothered me to think mabbe you'd be admirin' yellor cayuse a hull lot fer the way he's doin' his work, an' you would'n be able to tell me nothin' about it. Seein' 'at I'd have to 'skuse you fer not talkin', 'count of the rope, you know, they's gotta be some other way. I tell you what I'll do, Stranger. I'll kinda leave one arm loose up to the elbow, an' if you likes the way cayuse is workin' you flops that arm a whole lot; but if you don't like it, an' wanta get loose to talk over things what you mighta talked about beforehand, you keeps that arm tight to yore side. Here we are, Stranger, yellor cayuse standin' right where I left him — an' I bet the little cutie's jest pinin' fer a job.”

Rangy Pete leaned the Dervisher up against a boulder and immediately devoted his attention and his words to the burnt-yellow cayuse.

“Don't go friskin' around thattaway, li'l feller,” Rangy admonished. “Yer a funny li'l devil, ain't you? You kin allus smell them onnecessary gents a comin' down the trail, eain't you, yellor boy?

But you should'n go to gettin' none frisky this time, 'cause he's a great big, crool man, an' mabbe he'll kick most a lot. What's that yer sayin'? You'll pull him up easy, jest a wee li'l bit at a time? See't you do it, yeller boy, 'cause I don't want you to go strainin' no muscles."

Rangy Pete stopped talking to motion the bandit to resume the journey down the draw, and after a few minutes of stumbling through the darkness he called a halt. The bandit, being handicapped in his means of locomotion, was glad to stop. He leaned up against the first object which seemed to offer him any support.

"That shore is one fine cottonwood what yer huggin'," Rangy's encouraging voice resumed. "Great big trunk, could'n nohow break down. An' if you'll jest twist yore head up a bit you'll see that limb about twenty foot from the ground. They's a knot all set right to keep the rope from slippin', so's you won't nowise get hurt by floppin' agin the trunk. I've had my eye on that limb, Stranger, off an' on fer most nigh ten year, an' I ain't never seen it yet without wonderin' what it'd look like to see a bandit a hangin' from it — "

At this point the road agent's nerve began to break. Through the first of Rangy's chatty conversation he remained with his back against the trunk of the cottonwood, but towards the end some compelling power forced him to step quickly away.

He stepped towards Rangy Pete, and he appeared to be straining forward in an effort to study Pete's countenance. For Rangy's manner was as matter-of-fact, as casual and unflurried as though he were discussing plans for the cooking of the next meal. There was something disconcerting in Rangy's careless manner, something more nerve-breaking than as though he had indulged in a variety of threats.

"What you going to do to me?" the bandit asked, with an attempt at bluster.

"Hear that, li'l yeller cayuse? The gent with the ribbons all flockin' about him wants to know what yer gonna do. Do you want that I should tell him, yeller boy? Don't go whisperin' to me thatta-way, 'cause the gent's deaf an' it don't matter none. I been a tellin' him about a couple of times, an' he ain't heard yet — "

"Don't stand there chattering," the captive broke in, "but for Heaven's sake tell me what you're going to do to me."

"There you go, yeller boy, ain't I been a tellin' you said gent's most awful anxious fer you to start? He can't wait nohow — "

Again the captive broke in, this time with a fine variety of expletives.

"You shore do make me envious of yore flow of words," Rangy replied, as he scraped up chips, refuse, dead leaves and small branches from the

cottonwood into a small pile and began to kindle them into a fire.

"'Tain't what I hoped it'd be, Stranger," Rangy spoke encouragingly, "but if we don't waste no time, it'll be burnin' about right by the time you wants to use it fer seein' how li'l yeller boy does his work."

With that, Rangy Pete leisurely untied a second rope from the pommel of the saddle, looped it over the limb of the cottonwood with the first throw, put his full weight upon it to test the strength of the branch, then carefully adjusted one end of the rope around the bandit's neck. He was walking unhurriedly towards the cayuse with the other end of the rope in his hand when the captive broke in again, with the least amount of fortitude which he had yet displayed.

"For God's sake, man, are you crazy, or what's wrong with you? Are you a lunatic, that you could hang a man in cold blood like this?"

Rangy paused long enough to kick the tiny fire into a brighter flame.

"Hear that, cayuse?" Rangy replied. "The gent's tryin' to get kinda friendly, callin' us purty names, but don't you go to payin' no attention to him."

"For Heaven's sake, stop that terrible chatter, if you're not too crazy, and tell me what you mean to do." The captive started the sentence in a rational voice and ended it in a scream.

"Ain't gonna do nothin' atoll," Rangy returned. "I'm jest gonna tie this rope to yeller boy's saddle, what I shoulda done this afternoon afore I left Triple Butte, an' then I'm a goin' back to yore camp. I kinda forgot somethin' up there. My head ain't a workin' right, Stranger. They's somethin' sorta gone wrong, an' I can't remember what it is."

Rangy Pete calmly tied the rope to the saddle, and by this time there was enough flare from the fire to enable the other to see that the work was genuine, and that should the yellow cayuse suddenly be prompted with a desire to move away the results would be disastrous.

"My God, I knew you was crazy!" the captive stormed. "Don't you know that if that fool cayuse moves, he'll hang me?"

"Hang you?" Rangy asked in surprise. "That's funny, ain't it? I do sorta remember thinkin' somethin' about hangin' a man, but that was last week. It wasn't you, was it, Stranger? No, 'twan't you, 'cause I don't ever remember seein' you afore."

Rangy went to the left saddle-bag, opened it, took out a double handful of grain, placed it in his hat, and began to walk towards the cayuse's head.

The captive attempted speech, then stopped again.

Rangy calmly placed the feed in front of the cayuse's nose, and the animal took a step forward. The movement drew the rope snug about the road agent's neck.

Rangy Pete sat down upon the ground, some few feet in front of the cayuse. Then he leaned over abruptly and pulled the horse's food a foot farther away from the cottonwood. The cayuse immediately stepped forward and the movement swung the bandit from his position on the ground, carried him three or four feet through the air and deposited him with his feet once more upon the ground immediately beneath the knot on the cottonwood limb.

"They's one thing I kinda forgot to tell you —" Rangy spoke calmly while the captive was regaining his breath — "the cayuse jogs back and forth thatta-way 'cause he's eatin' a meal. Yeller boy don't look noways comfortable the way he's standin' now, so I'm thinkin' I'll hafta move him a bit closer to me."

As Rangy reached out for the hat of food, the bandit screamed out a protest. Rangy looked at him in surprise.

"Don't you go to worryin' none about yellor boy not gettin' his feed," he soothed. "It does look kinda crool fer me to snatch it away from him thisaway, but he's got legs, Mister, four of them, an' he'll step forward."

Again Rangy reached out his hand.

"No, my God, it isn't that," the bandit gasped, "but you'll hang me. What do you want? I'll tell you anything you wanta know."

"Was they somethin' I was a wantin' to know, Mister?" Rangy Pete asked with evident astonish-

ment. "I'm sorta forgetful like, but it does kinda seem they was somethin' — "

With his hand still reaching out for the cayuse's food, Rangy paused as though pondering something which was quite beyond the limit of his intelligence. The light of the fire, shining upon his bronzed features, showed a puzzled face, and that did not lessen in the least the bandit's impression that he really had to do with a madman.

"Yes, don't you remember, you were asking me about a woman?" the captive prompted.

"A woman?" Rangy Pete replied. "Jest you go to hearin' that, yeller boy. Said gent behind you what's most onnecessary to the landscape has been sayin' somethin' about a woman. He's most mabbe likely to go temptin' us. An' we don't wantta be tempted none, do we, yeller boy? Cummon, cayuse, an' eat some nice — "

"Don't do that," the bandit screamed, as Rangy once more made a move to draw the feed closer to him. "Have you gone stark mad? Don't you remember a few minutes ago you were asking me about a woman you called Blue Eyes? You thought I was her — "

Rangy Pete drew a hand across his eyes, as though to brush away a daze. When he looked back at the captive there were still puzzled lines upon his features, but there was also a show of interest which had not been there the minute before.

"Gosh A'mighty, Stranger!" he exclaimed, "I do sorta remember it now. Funny, ain't it, cayuse, 'at I should ferget anythin' like that? My head ain't right, Stranger, ain't been right fer a year, an' I kinda get things mixed up. But I ain't mixed none now, 'cause I remembers all about Blue Eyes. It's last week, Stranger,' at I's sorta lopin' along after Blue Eyes — "

"Last week?" the captive bellowed. "Good heavens, man, you're crazy as a loon! It was just a few hours ago. Can't you remember nothing?"

Rangy Pete shook his head sagely, and he assumed as cunning a glance as his experience would permit.

"Naw, Stranger, you cain't fool me thattaway. I remembers the hull thing now. I'm a lopin' after Blue Eyes down the Double K way, when what'd I see but some frisky gents a rustlin' some of the Double K brands. I remembers how me and Jumbo Irish and Baldy Tipper and some other punchers chases said gents, an' we catches one of them. Yeah, Stranger, yer shore the gent what we catched — "

The captive interrupted with some sounds which, because of their volume, proved unintelligible.

"Shore, jest as you been sayin', Mister, we took you over to Triple Butte fer trial, an' Ole Judge Slocum decided you was plumb undecorative to the scenery an' 'at you'd hafta be bumped off. I kinda remembers the hull thing now. Funny, ain't it, how I fergot it thattaway; but I told you my head

ain't allus right. I could'n think a while ago what I's doin' here with you, an' you with a rope around yer neck, but now I remembers alright. I'm the deputy, Mister, what does all the swingin's, an' yer the hoss thief what we caught down the Double K way."

Rangy Pete looked up at the captive, and as the light from the fire played over his countenance it showed features which had become entirely blank of expression.

"My God, man," the bandit gasped out, "I'm not a horse thief, an' you're not the deputy. Listen a minute, man, and let me explain."

Rangy twisted his head to one side as though listening carefully, and he did not overlook the marked tremor which had come into the captive's voice.

"I'm guessin I've got you lined up plumb so's you'll tell the truth fer once in yore life," Rangy Pete remarked to himself, while outwardly he merely continued to turn his head curiously in the direction of the other man.

"Listen," the bandit continued, with the tremor still manifest. "I am not a horse thief. I am one of the Dervishers, the road agents, you know. We went to Triple Butte this afternoon for some reason which Dervisher Dick didn't tell me — "

Rangy Pete laughed suddenly and harshly.

"Funny I fergot," Rangy exclaimed, "but I

knows now why he went. He's a 'vaporated apple fiend, jest like Dan Merrill. He went to git them 'vaporated apples."

It was quite evident, even through the semi-darkness, that the bandit shivered, and a look of intense fright passed across his features.

"Yes, my good fellow, it was to get the evaporated apples," he decided to humor Rangy, with the quaver still in his voice. "We got the apples, and a posse chased us. You were one of the posse, don't you remember? And when I left the main party of Dervishers and dodged back this draw, you followed me. You thought I was Blue Eyes — "

"An' who's Blue Eyes?" Rangy demanded in a puzzled way.

"She is a woman who's been riding with us. I think you must have seen her in Triple Butte this afternoon. You were really following her when you got on my track. Now that's the whole thing. That's how you come to be here, and why I've got this rope around my neck. You weren't sent out to hang me. You told me a while ago that if I wouldn't tell you where Blue Eyes was, you would hang me — "

"Gosh!" Rangy exclaimed, "did I tell you that, Stranger? An' I ain't never heard of Blue Eyes before. Here, you cayuse, back up a bit an' let the Stranger talk. He's gonna tell us a purty story about Blue Eyes. What's yore name, Stranger?"

"They call me Buzzard Flynn," the captive informed, with a faint show of returning confidence. "I'm one of the Dervisher riders, and if you take this rope off me so I can walk about a bit, I'll show you where you can find Blue Eyes — "

"I ain't sayin' 'at I wanta see Blue Eyes none. I ain't so awful set on women folks."

A little of the fright returned to Buzzard Flynn's face.

"But you said when you saw me first that you were after Blue Eyes," he prompted hopefully.

"Did we say that, cayuse?" Rangy demanded of the animal at his side. "We shore is funny in our heads at times, yeller cayuse. But go on an' tell me, Buzzard."

"You said you just wanted to get another look at Blue Eyes' face," Buzzard recalled. "Now I know just where Blue Eyes was going to leave the band, and I know where she will be camping for the night. We had that all arranged ahead of time. We always do. So if you'll take this rope offen me, I'll show you right where she is."

Buzzard Flynn pitched his voice in as placating a tone as possible — a tone designed to wheedle the fevered brain of a crazy man.

"Shore you ain't foolin' me, and 'at they is sech a woman?" Rangy demanded, with a show of interest.

"Honest to God, man, there is. If your head

wasn't all wheels, you'd know that yourself. Come with me and I'll show you. Just take this rope off — ”

Rangy Pete sprang to his feet and began a sudden display of activity.

“I'll shore go with you, Mr. Buzzard, but I ain't gonna take no rope off yore neck, 'cause if we don't happen to find no lady, it'll be plumb useful right where it is.”

Rangy untied the rope from the saddle, threw it back over the cottonwood limb and retied it to the saddle. Then he frisked Mr. Buzzard Flynn's pockets in a most thorough manner to guarantee that the gentleman was not hiding out any weapons which might prove dangerous in the dark. After that he loosened the Dervisher's bonds to allow him much greater freedom of movement.

“Now, Mr. Buzzard Flynn, we're ready to lope along. You an' me'll jog out in front an' let li'l cayuse come along ahind. My head's kinda feelin' right now, Mr. Buzzard. It goes that way at times, sorta off an' on. An' 'cause I'm feelin' charitable like now, I wanta tell you 'at you should'n try no tricks, fer you don't know when my head's gonna get queer again. You get funny, an' all I gotta do is whistle. When I whistles, yeller cayuse allus acts like a plumb fool. He allus turns around an' acts like he thought they's a square meal a runnin' away from him in t'other direction. I'm tellin' you this, Mr. Buzzard, 'cause we're sorta friends now, an'

I would'n noways want you to get hurt none. Now you jest saunter along pronto, an' I'm thinkin' you'd better find that person you call Blue Eyes afore mornin', 'cause they's times around mornin' when I do get queer ideas into my head. Want me to tell you what I done onet in the mornin'?"

"No! No! For Heaven's sake, let's hurry! I'll take your word for it," Buzzard Flynn declared, as he started to lead the way up the draw.

Rangy Pete swung in at his side, with the cayuse rather less than the length of the rope behind. At Flynn's camp Rangy caught the bandit's animal, saddled it, collected everything in the way of equipment, and then resumed his place in the line of march, leading the other animal.

"Since you been askin' me to tell you what I done onet in the early mornin', I s'pose I'll hafta," Rangy continued the conversation. "I don't s'pose I'd remembered, except when I's deputy before, me an' another gent most nigh as onnecessary as you, was a roamin' about thisaway when I got kinda lonesome. I sorta forgot cayuse, an' started to whistle, just like this — "

"Don't!" the other shrieked a hurried interruption.

"No. Perhaps I had'n better. I's most nigh forgettin' again. Anyways, I started to whistle, an' yellin' cayuse, he don't know much about music, so he jest naturally thought of 'at meal a runnin' away from him. I remembers now. That's how

I lost my job as deputy. Wanta see how li'l cayuse does it, Mr. Buzzard?"

"I'll take your word for it," Buzzard Flynn returned hastily.

Rangy Pete made a chuckling noise in his throat, but Mr. Buzzard Flynn, mistaking that for a further manifestation of insanity, quickened his pace as he led the way up the draw.

CHAPTER IV

As he made his way through the darkness, within arm's length of the stumbling Buzzard, Rangy Pete's brain was keenly alert. That is why he began to toy with the future, and why he succeeded only in startling himself.

He knew quite well the direction in which they were feeling their way, and that brought with it two distinct sources for alarm. This route was leading directly into the buttes, and if there really were a bandit rendezvous tucked away somewhere in the heart of the butte lands, it would not be a particularly difficult thing for Buzzard Flynn to lead him fairly into it.

The Buzzard, he could see, was making his way confidently, and as swiftly as the handicaps of the night would permit, in a well defined direction; and that spoke of an assured purpose in the Buzzard's mind. With care, Buzzard Flynn might spring a trap upon him; but that was the least alarming feature of the situation.

For the course which Flynn was taking led straight towards the Pelican draw. And hours ago he, Rangy Pete, had seen Jumbo Irish riding swiftly

and arrow-like in that same direction. The thought of that was a frightening thing.

"Where is this blue-eyed person?" Rangy demanded, with such sudden intensity of manner that Buzzard Flynn's answer was almost mechanical.

"She is over here in one of these other draws," he informed hastily. "That is what we arranged. We left the main party one at a time, and then, after hiding out for the night, we know right where to meet tomorrow, or the next day — "

"Don't yammer your head off. What draw is she in? Tell me that."

Rangy's interruption was an impatient one, and it encouraged a prompt response.

"She's hiding in the Pelican draw — "

"Goin' to stay there all night?" Rangy's interjection was more fevered still. "Was she going to camp the same as you?"

"Ain't that what I been telling you?"

"Then mooch along. Show some speed." Rangy issued his instructions with an intensity which astonished himself.

There was so much intensity in his manner that he wondered just why it was there. He wondered why he should object to Jumbo Irish taking the prize which he had allotted to himself. When he thought of the blue-eyed bandit falling into the hands of Jumbo, a warm flush of anger rose to his

cheeks and rested there for many minutes while he drove the Buzzard along with furious stride.

Yet when he grew more calm it was difficult to understand just why his emotions should have risen at all. Judged with a calmly measuring brain, there was not a reason in the world why a woman who played the rôle of a bandit should be any more free from punishment than a man; yet — Was it that he himself had wanted to be the means of inflicting that punishment? No, it could not have been that, for such a thought left him more angry still.

Just what had brought him here anyway? Though Rangy pondered that point through many minutes, he failed to find a satisfying answer. Yet, in the lack of an answer, why should he feel resentment towards Jumbo Irish taking the blue-eyed bandit back to Triple Butte?

For Rangy had not the slightest doubt of Jumbo's efficiency. Nor had he the least thought that Jumbo would tarry long in the winning of that stack of fifty yellow boys.

The Pelican draw, he knew, was miles closer than his own position to that spot where he had parted from Jumbo Irish in the middle of the afternoon, and when he recalled that fact, Rangy felt the fever burning in his veins once more. Beyond doubt, Irish would already be on his way back to Triple Butte with the female bandit as his captive.

And whatever may have been his plans for the future, *that* had not been within the range of his calculations. A brave show he and Triple Butte would make, to capture the one woman in the band, while the real renegades slipped through the net! And Jumbo Irish, he knew, would have no such thoughts of compunction. For Jumbo's brain would be toying only with that wager of fifty yellow boys.

"Faster!" Rangy's voice prodded Buzzard Flynn into a still more rapid stride; yet what he hoped to gain by it was more than Rangy knew.

Still, there was just the one chance.

"You know where she was goin' to camp?" he asked with an anxiety which he kept from his voice.

"Sure thing," the Buzzard informed. "I'll lead you right to the place, if you'll trade me for her."

That chance, Rangy knew, was that Jumbo Irish, confident in his capture and in the shorter miles to Triple Butte, might wait until daylight for the making of the return trip. And if that were so —

"You trade me for her?" Buzzard's voice repeated, for Flynn, quick to sense the unusual in the other's manner, was beginning to fancy that he could see the gleam of a way through his own immediate problem.

All madmen, Buzzard knew, have wide chinks in their armor, and fortune had played into his hands most shrewdly in showing him the weakness of this lunatic behind him. He could see now that his only

hope was to encourage the capture of the female rider; then, after he had been set free, and while this elongated strip of humanity was devoting his attention to his new captive, he, Buzzard, would make a display of that talent which had won him his name. He would poach upon the other, remove a dangerous lunatic, and at the same time win the gratitude of Blue Eyes. The farther Buzzard tramped, the more he became enthused for carrying out his portion of the program. Luck, which but a short time ago appeared to have deserted him, was, in reality, with him all the time.

Rangy Pete suddenly laughed aloud.

"Shore I'll trade you for Blue Eyes," he proclaimed; and he wondered at the chuckle way down in the throat of Buzzard Flynn.

That, Rangy fancied on the spur of the moment, would be his course. If this one chance should win out and Jumbo Irish were still in the Pelican draw, then he would trade Buzzard Flynn for Blue Eyes. The idea was such an engrossing one that he scarcely noticed the miles slipping behind him; he was only dimly conscious that they had made a hair-pin turn and were now traveling down the Pelican draw towards Triple Butte. Somewhere along this boulder-strewn course which twisted its way out to the plains would be Blue Eyes and Jumbo Irish; or would it be the main body of the Dervishers?

The eager strides of the Buzzard seemed a remote

hint that the latter might be the case; but that, he believed, would be hardly possible. The Dervishers, thorn though they were in the flesh of the plains, would scarcely have the daring to reform at a point so near Triple Butte, unless, by chance, their work with that sun-slumbering center had not been finished and they were planning another sally to complete it.

From that point forward Rangy went more cautiously. He checked the pace of the Buzzard and divided his contemplation of the future with a sharp outlook in all directions.

Yes, in some way or other he must trade Buzzard Flynn for Blue Eyes.

Then a sort of mental panic gripped him.

For the impossibility of making an open trade with Jumbo Irish and still retaining any secrecy for his motives — whatever the future might decide them to be — occurred to him abruptly as an almost insuperable obstacle. Jumbo, plainsman that he was, ready-tongued, ready-muscled and keen-witted, might make the exchange for a consideration; but after that, what then? His tongue could be stilled, perhaps. But only if Rangy rode back to Triple Butte with the woman as his captive.

And was that any part of the purpose which had brought him here?

That point was still undetermined when Rangy noticed that the Buzzard's stride was slackening.

"She can't be more than a quarter of a mile away," the Buzzard confided. "I'm giving you the straight stuff, Mister, and if Blue Eyes doesn't happen to be there, don't you go getting excited. If she ain't there, you make allowance for a woman not doing what you expect of her. You come back and take the ropes off me, and we'll hunt her together."

Rangy Pete made a guttural noise which may have been compliance or refusal; he completed certain rope work which left Buzzard Flynn anchored to a huge boulder; then he began to contemplate the darkened draw before him.

The main body of the Dervishers, or Jumbo Irish, or a vacant camp — which would it be? Rangy returned, inserted a knotted kerchief between Buzzard's lips, and whispered his instructions.

"Don't you go talking to the stars while I'm gone," he admonished. "If I hear anything like that, it's apt to make my head go wrong again, and I might forget I'm a deputy."

As he slipped away into the darkness, he noticed that the Buzzard was shivering slightly; but that was not the problem which concerned him now.

A quarter of a mile down the draw, Flynn had said. So the next few minutes might decide if this were a trap, or if Jumbo Irish had already started for Triple Butte with his captive.

Foot by foot he felt his way through the blackness.

with every sense strained to read even the faintest of tokens.

Presently, at his left, the light stamping of feet! That would be horses, restless, feeling his presence. And their number would be an important thing.

Rangy Pete removed his boots and placed them behind a boulder. Then once more he crept forward, on hands and knees. Shortly, before him in the darkness, there loomed the outlines of the animals.

A wave of gratitude swept over him. For there were but the two horses, and the story which that told him was slightly intoxicating in its significance. Two horses meant Jumbo Irish and Blue Eyes.

With that surety before him Rangy Pete sat flat upon the rock to ponder the future.

Black night was upon him, night which conceals the movements of man. It was that consciousness of night which in the end brought the rift of an idea into Rangy's brain to shatter the outer shackles of his problem. Two people in the draw — Jumbo and Blue Eyes! And Jumbo Irish, whatever else he might be, maintained the scrupulous instincts of a gentleman. That would mean that Jumbo, whether awake or asleep, would be rigidly observing the codes of mankind, and would, therefore, be occupying a position at some little distance from his captive.

Rangy Pete chuckled silently.

The chance was there. The way would be open to him to take the female bandit under his own

particular care, provided, of course, he could feel his way about this draw with the caution of an animal.

If only Jumbo were sound asleep! But if not — Rangy shrugged his shoulders through the night; then silently he began to feel his way down the draw.

As he worked his way along, foot by foot, Rangy's ears were strained to catch even the faintest sound of life; but the only whisperings which reached him were the vague murmurings of the night.

There, before him, a dim and huddled form crouching against the growth of rock!

For a full minute Rangy watched that form, until at length it flopped an arm restlessly aside. Fortune surely was playing into his hands, for that flopping arm could mean nothing but sleep.

Jumbo asleep, through the night watch! So the rest should be much simpler now.

This time he crept forward more cautiously than before; and he began a slow and methodical search of the deeper shadows at some distance from that huddled form under the rock.

A quarter of an hour passed in this manner, until at length Rangy's outstretched fingers came into contact with something soft and yielding which had nothing to do with the bare rock under his knees.

"A blanket," he muttered. "That shore means that somebody is bedded down soft and nice. I'm guessing — "

"Go ahead and guess," the answer came back in a cold whisper, "but don't get too near. I may be tied, but I can kick your eyes out just the same."

"Gosh A'mighty!" Rangy exclaimed, in a thick whisper. "It is shore little Blue Eyes. I've been looking and looking for you, and here you are all tied up like a fatted calf —"

Rangy Pete paused, as he became aware of a slight gasp from the other. After that there was a motionless silence. Through that silence Rangy appreciated that the situation was, after all, a difficult one. He had found it easy to talk to Blue Eyes while she stood over him with a derringer and while his hands were in the air; but now, with the situation reversed and with darkness about them, it was altogether different.

"Who are you?" This time the voice was obviously feminine, and there was a marked relief back of the words. "I thought you were that person who roped me last night."

"No, Miss, I ain't Jumbo Irish, but he ain't more'n fifty yards away, so we gotta be most awful quiet." Rangy found the words coming more freely. "You don't know me because it's dark, but you and me are old friends. We met up this afternoon. Don't you remember? You kinda amused me by letting me look into the barrel of yore gun."

"You're that long, skinny thing that was standing up against Ike Collander's store?" the voice asked.

"You talk about as funny as you look, and that's the reason I couldn't forget you. Besides, you're the only one I held a gun on, for Collander doesn't count. But what are you doing here? One of the posse, I suppose? And you want to get the credit for capturing a woman. You aren't satisfied to let that other person out there have the credit — "

"Sh — h! Miss, you're like them all. You talk too much. But can you walk?"

"Do you suppose I'd be here if I could have walked away? No, that posse person who's sleeping out there like a hog, roped me up and down and across and then tied me to a rock. I haven't slept a wink."

"We'll shore correct his impoliteness," Rangy returned. "If I take them ropes off will you come with me, Miss?"

"Where do you want me to go?" the girl demanded, instantly on the defensive.

"I got a joke I want to tell you about, but I don't want you to laugh right here and wake up Jumbo. The joke ain't more'n half a mile up the draw, and if it don't make you laugh, Miss, you can cuss me for five minutes and I won't say a word back."

"Get busy. I'll go. Your company can't be much worse than the company of that person you call Jumbo."

"You shore won't be repenting that statement," Rangy encouraged as he immediately applied himself

to the task of removing the ropes which Jumbo Irish had applied so conscientiously in the interests of the law.

"It mayn't look purty, but if yer takin' a tip from this boy, you'll mooch along on yore hands and knees, same's I do," Rangy suggested in a whisper, when the last of the ropes fell away.

Rangy Pete promptly gathered up Jumbo's supply of lariats, and he immediately began to crawl away from the scene of the improvised jail. He crawled for two hundred yards before he glanced back over his shoulder, but when he did look he was not at all surprised to find that the girl was only a few feet behind him. Rangy continued in this manner for another hundred yards until they were past the picketed horses, and when they rounded a boulder large enough to hide them from all view he rose to his feet, donned the discarded shoes and waited for the girl.

"Got a match?" the girl demanded the moment she arrived at Rangy Pete's side. "That person down there couldn't possibly see us now."

"Shore," Rangy returned. "Want the makin's too?"

"Idiot," the girl returned, with as much vigor as a whisper would permit. "Sit down behind that rock and give me a match."

Rangy Pete obeyed, quite forgetful that the other was in reality the captive. The girl promptly

struck the match, cupped it with her hands until it blazed freely, then she held it close to Rangy's face, and as she held it there she leaned forward and peered intently into the man's features. Rangy Pete found himself looking back into a pair of intensely blue eyes. They were wide and eager now, totally unconscious of his scrutiny, and they were evidently making a hasty but adequate estimate of Rangy Pete. Beyond the eyes Rangy saw but little, though just before the match flared out and plunged them back into darkness he was conscious that the shapely lines of the chin which had first drawn his attention back in Triple Butte were extended to the rest of her somewhat oval countenance. The riding hat, thrown back, revealed a rather tumbled mass of hair whose shade he could not quite determine, but which, he felt, was much darker than that wisp of straw-colored braid which he had seen once before.

"You sure are a queer one," the girl commented, immediately the darkness settled about them. "You're out on a man-hunt. There can't be any doubt of that, for you've got enough hardware on you to sink a schooner. You look almost human, too, but you haven't taken ordinary human precautions. Don't you know there hasn't been a minute since you untied those ropes when I couldn't have let daylight into your interior?"

"That ain't no ways possible, Miss, 'cause it's most mighty dark here — "

"If you want it straighter," the voice interrupted, "I mean I hid out a gun on that posse person when he pretended to search me. I sure got a trick, Mister whatever your name is — "

"Most folks call me Pete, Rangy Pete, an' I would'n consider it noways of a liberty if you done the same. But what's the trick, Miss, besides lookin' at a person with them blue eyes?"

"If you was a Dervisher I'd most probably shoot you up for that," the girl returned, quite unmoved, "but the minute that posse person you've been calling Jumbo Irish threw a rope over me from behind a rock, I slipped my hat off so he knew I wasn't any man. After that, he's so modest he didn't search me for this gun I hid out on him. So you can thank Jumbo back there for the fact that I've got you covered now, Mr. Rangy Pete. S'pose I was to say to you, 'Hands up?'"

"You said that to me once before today, an' it sounded kinda nice. Anything you could say would'n sound so bad."

Through the darkness Rangy Pete caught a sound which was suspiciously like the choked-off end of laughter, but when the girl spoke again there was no suggestion of mildness in the tones.

"That stuff doesn't go, Rangy Pete. You ought to know that with only one girl in a camp of twenty men I have heard a whole lot nicer things than that. It got so bad once that I had to put up a sign

on a tree — ‘Cut out the mush.’ Now you had just better mosey along and remember that I will be right behind you with the derringer trained on your back.”

“That shore is a nice comfortable feeling,” Rangy returned. “I’m kinda queer thattaway, so’t I don’t feel noways right unless they is a gun trained on me. But remember if you don’t keep that derringer sorta under control you won’t never hear that joke I’m gonna show you. You shoot me, Miss, an’ I won’t tell you nothin’ more about that li’l joke of mine.”

“Mooch along. I’m getting anxious. But how far do you have to go before a joke’s a joke?”

“About a half mile, Miss. You could’n noways appreciate it ’less youse right on the spot.”

This time Rangy led the way with less caution, for he knew that even though Jumbo Irish did come to life and discover that his captive had vanished, there would be little which Jumbo could do in the darkness to regain his earlier position of mastery.

Shortly they arrived at the spot where Buzzard Flynn had been trussed up and tied to a rock for the sake of security.

Rangy stopped and asked the girl to remain a short distance away while he advanced upon Buzzard. The latter had evidently awaited Rangy’s return with some anxiety, as he lost no time in

opening the conversation once Rangy came within sight.

"You find Blue Eyes all right just as I told you?" he demanded in a voice which carried easily to the girl waiting in the background.

"I gotta say, Buzzard, 'at yer the most honest road agent I ever come against," Rangy replied. "She's a campin' out just where you told me she'd be, an' it wa'n't no trouble atoll to get her — "

Buzzard Flynn laughed with relief, and he attempted to straighten himself from his cramped position.

"Fine," he exclaimed. "Now that you've got her you'd better slip these ribbons offen me 'cause a bargain's a bargain."

"A bargain shore is a bargain," Rangy agreed. "They ain't nobody can say Rangy Pete didn't live up to his bargains. I told you, Buzzard, 'cause you suggested it, 'at I'd trade you fer Blue Eyes, so I ain't gonna disappoint nobody noways — "

The balance of the sentence was completely lost owing to the vigorous manner in which the girl precipitated herself between them.

"Gimme another match, Rangy Pete," she demanded. "I think I recognize the voice of that coyote, but I want to make sure."

"They ain't nothin' to make shore about, 'cause it's Buzzard Flynn," Rangy informed. "'At's the joke I been tellin' you about."

The girl snatched the match which Rangy proffered, and she held the blazing tip so close to Buzzard Flynn's features that he shrank back from the flame.

"A joke?" she exclaimed in anger, as she swung about to Rangy Pete. "I heard what this coyote said. He brought you to me and now you're going to let him go because you got me — "

The blue-eyed person produced her derringer with a speed which aroused Rangy's admiration. She presented it towards the shrinking form of the Buzzard, and then at the critical moment she hesitated. That also pleased Rangy Pete. Blue Eyes, it was becoming evident, was something of the rip-ringer which he had promised himself she would be, but even at that he approved greatly when she shrank from shooting the captive in cold blood.

"I'd like to do something to that person," she spoke tensely, "but I can't shoot him like that. Mr. Pete, take his ropes off. Give him a gun, and we'll shoot it out."

"I ain't sayin' but what yer entitled to some of yore feelin's," Rangy soothed, "but you ain't got the joke yet. I can't let you go to punchin' no holes into Buzzard Boy 'cause him and me has got a bargain. He's to lead me to yore campin' place, what he's done; an' I'm to trade him for you, which I'm gonna do. Up you get, Buzzard Boy. A bargain's

a bargain, jest as you been a sayin', an' I could'n feel noways right if I didn't do as I said."

"Trade me, sure. You let me go."

"Which means 'at I gotta put you right where I found Blue Eyes," Rangy spoke quite mildly. "You shore can't have nothin' to kick about that. I didn't find Blue Eyes a sittin' here on the rock, 'cause I found her a half mile down, an' that's where I gotta put you, er I could'n never feel right no more."

"Sounds all right, but let's hurry about it," Buzzard agreed, for it had become evident to him that the strain of insanity in Rangy Pete was creeping again to the surface.

Buzzard Flynn rose to his feet readily when Rangy adjusted the ropes to make it possible, and he was still fairly well pleased with events until the girl suddenly broke out into laughter.

"I thought you'd get it if you'd jest look the right way," Rangy addressed her, "which is a hull lot better'n punchin' this person's hide full of onnecessary holes, ain't it, Miss?"

"I wouldn't think of arguing the point," the girl returned when she had gained control of her laughter, "and, Mr. Pete, I want to thank you right now for not letting me shoot him."

"Don't mention it, Miss. It ain't nothing at all. I only done it because I didn't want to spoil yore joke. Now what are you gonna do — come with me, or wait here till I get back?"

"Who says I'm going to do either?" the girl flashed back.

Rangy Pete toyed with the tip of his left ear.

"That's just what I been thinking about," he admitted at length, "and I don't know that I can answer the question, Miss, but if you ain't noways in a hurry, it'd shore oblige me a whole lot if you'd sort of hang around. I ain't got nothing to say to you but I'd like to talk to you just the same."

"All right, Mr. Pete. I'll stand without roping. You'll find me here when you get back. Here's something that might come in useful."

When Rangy turned, he found that the girl was handing him a bandana of firm texture and that she was making a motion as though to twist it about Buzzard's face.

"You're shore thoughtful of Buzzard," Rangy commented as he tied the handkerchief across Flynn's face, somewhat to the captive's dismay. "Stand still, you Buzzard Boy. There's some poison fog down the draw a ways, and we don't want you to go breathing none of that stuff, do we, Miss Blue Eyes? Shore thing, Buzzard Boy. I knew you'd be grateful. I won't be long, Miss Blue Eyes, if you'll just wait. Come along, Buzzard. March pronto."

Rangy Pete set off through the darkness, prodding Buzzard Flynn in front of him, and reverting as he

went to that slurring style of conversation which was like a mask before his emotions.

"They's a secret I gotta tell you, Buzzard," Rangy informed. "I'm gonna put you right where I found Blue Eyes, 'cause I could'n never look you in the face agin if I didn't do jest as I promised I would. Rangy Pete don't say much, but what he says you can take as yore hope of Kingdom Come. When I found li'l Blue Eyes, she was all cuddled up nice and snug in a blanket, an' Buzzard Boy'll shore like that blanket, 'cause he ain't got none of his own. They's a lot of nice ropes all tied about her with the purtiest li'l knots you ever set eyes on. An' they's a great big crool man a sleepin' like a hawg about a few steps away. He's an awful crool man, Buzzard, an' if I's you I'd hate most horrible to wake him up. He's crool after dark, 'cause he once killed a man at night an' that give him queer ideas in the head. He ain't like me atoll — wha's matter, Buzzard Boy? Cold? S'all right, I'll 'skuse you for not talkin', but as I's sayin', this here person can't bear to be wakened none at night. He allus shoots when he's wakened at night, 'cause he's got the queer idea 'at it's the ghost comin' back. I told you he's queer in the head, but he shoots first at night an' looks afterwards. If you don't believe me, Buzzard, I know of a nice fine rock to sit behind while you tries it out. An' I shore would like to know if Jumbo can shoot straight when he

gets thattaway. If you want to try it out, Buzzard, you jest make a wee li'l bit of noise when I'm a beddin' you down where I found Blue Eyes. But if you want to wait and see him in the mornin' when he won't have no queer ideas, you jest creeps along like a coyote — all right, Buzzard, if you ain't got nothin' more to say we'll start to ereepin', 'cause the great big crool man ain't far away now."

Rangy Pete led the way, creeping on hands and knees as he had done twice before, and he found that Buzzard Flynn was remarkably docile and silent behind him. The Buzzard's experiences during the past few hours with this obviously irrational person had been too varied to give him any strong desire to prolong their acquaintance, so Buzzard was no less silent than Rangy himself as they stole towards the improvised jail, and as Rangy rolled the other in the blanket which but a short time ago had sheltered the girl.

"That noise you hear is the crool man telling the world that he's asleep," Rangy whispered his parting message.

With that he stole away in the darkness. As he crawled along he listened carefully for any advertising of revolt on the part of Buzzard Flynn; but judging from the vast silence about him, it seemed that the Buzzard had been subdued.

Then abruptly, through the stillness of the night, from up the Pelican draw there came a dull clatter-

ing sound. Rangy listened intently; then shortly he gave an exclamation of dismay.

"Hoof beats!" he proclaimed. "Blue Eyes has gone!"

For a moment longer he listened until the faint clattering died away, and when he moved forward in the direction of his own cayuse it was totally without animation.

The girl, he could be positive now, had made good her opening to escape.

That was a perfectly obvious thing for her to do; but his consciousness of her act brought a vast, inexplicable loneliness upon him.

CHAPTER V

THE one consoling feature of the girl's flight was the thought that his attitude towards her had been settled. The way was clear for him to turn aside from his undefined purpose and to return to Triple Butte.

Yet almost instantly that thought was swept aside and Rangy found himself hurrying forward with the warmth of conviction upon him that he must overtake the bandit before she had ridden too far. He was hastening so conscientiously that he almost collided with a figure standing near the burnt-yellow cayuse. That occasioned an astonished exclamation.

"I thought you'd gone," he burst out. "Heard the horse — "

"Buzzard's mount tried to run away," the blue-eyed one explained calmly, "but I caught it and brought it back. Now, what kind of a person are you, Mr. Rangy Pete?"

Rangy's left hand put in a few moments' work with the tip of his left ear, and while that was in process he shuffled his feet backward and forward.

"I am just a long-shanked puncher who never has

anything to say for himself," he began a tentative explanation which he found cut short by a gesture.

"I mean, are you any good in a fight?" the girl elaborated her demands.

"Not a bit," Rangy replied, to conceal the inadequacy of his thoughts; for he felt that he needed to study this person who should be, but who wasn't, showing to him the slightest deference as captor.

It was dark, with only the light of the stars to dissolve the gloom, and the girl was standing there calmly, looking somewhere out into the bleakness of the night beyond him. The face, he could see through the smudge of star shine, was manifestly girlish; it was oval and free of any shrewish contours; the general lines told that. But as for the details of her features, he would have to wait for the light of day to tell him that.

Finally the girl came out of her mood of abstraction and looked at Rangy Pete curiously.

"Which way are we going?" she demanded. "Are you taking me back to Triple Butte?"

"Triple Butte shore would be a whole lot decorated by your presence," Rangy returned reflectively, as he busied himself with his saddle, "but if you don't happen to be riding that way, it don't matter. Me, I'm riding up this draw and back another. I aim to hit Triple Butte some time in the future."

"Then I will ride with you." The girl's decision

appeared to be an abrupt one. "Lead the way, Mr. Pete."

Rangy did lead the way in a strange frame of mind. By the time they reached the juncture with the Lone Shadow draw the early daylight was filtering its way over the tops of the buttes and Rangy decided that it was time for him to determine whether the morning light were as complimentary to the girl as the darkness had been.

Yet when he turned about he experienced a distinct sense of disappointment, for during the night ride she had readjusted the mask about her face.

"Them shore is fine things to keep the sunburn off," he commented, "but you'd oblige me a whole lot, Miss, by taking down the scenery."

"Going to make me?" the girl asked lightly.

"Hadn't thought of it," Rangy admitted, "but just the same there ain't any piece of cloth ever made could take the place of them cheeks of yours."

"How do you know?" the bandit insisted.

Rangy toyed again with his left ear.

"I don't know for sure," he allowed, "but I'm hinting most awful hard to find out. Besides, you've got a name about you somewhere."

The certain consciousness that he was undergoing a rigid scrutiny caused Rangy to pause again. The attitude of this Dervisher, he told himself through that pause, was not what it should be, for there was

not the faintest hint in the girl's manner that Rangy was master of the situation. It was even stronger than that. It seemed almost as though the female bandit were intent upon some personal problem of which Rangy Pete was only the fringe.

"I'll go with you a bit farther," she declared irrelevantly, at length. "Lead on, Macduff."

"You got me wrong, Miss. I've been explaining that my name ain't Macduff nor Mac nothing. But do you mean that I should head for the buttes or the Double K?"

"Any place you like, provided we get breakfast. I'm starving."

"I got enough grub to cure that feeling," Rangy informed, with a complete return of confidence, "so we'll just be sloping it down the draw to a place where there's a nice spring; and now that we've got started nice and friendly like, ain't you gonna take off that eye blanket and let me see just how homely you are?"

Rangy waited for a few yards of travel, but there was no response.

"I've seen a few women folk in my time," he resumed patiently. "Some of them has been homely, and some has been just fairish to look at. Kinda wouldn't hurt yore eyes much, Miss, that is, if the sun wasn't too bright and they wasn't too close. I'm saying, I've seen a few homely ones, but I ain't ever before run up against one what was so homely

she had to wear an eye blanket in the daytime and could only take it off at night. You'll excuse me, Miss, for saying that they couldn't grow them that homely down at Triple Butte where I come from, though they've been trying for a long time. Now there's Shifty Lizz down in Tony Burke's saloon who don't look nowadays human unless a person's had about six or seven red-eyes, and yet she don't wear no eye blanket — ”

“Rangy Pete, I'm not to be joshed,” the girl interrupted. “The wearing of this eye blanket, as you call it, is a serious business. It isn't a matter for you to take lightly, Mr. Pete, so if you can control your naturally silent disposition until we have had a taste of breakfast, there is just a chance that I may take this mask off and tell you my name.”

Rangy showed his approval by urging the yellow cayuse into quicker action. He led the way to the spring as rapidly as the cayuse could take the trail, and he was not in the least alarmed when the blue-eyed rider dropped behind.

Some few minutes later the girl arrived at the scene of his culinary efforts, calmly seated herself upon a rock and waited for him to serve her. The casual air with which she took up her place betokened that she was accustomed to receiving the ministrations of others. The ministrations of Buzzard Flynn perhaps? The thought of that caused Rangy to poke the fire savagely; but when he turned

towards her he managed to assume a tolerant grin.

But the frugal meal was not as productive as Rangy had hoped it would be.

"The mask stays on," she announced coolly at the close, "but I will meet you half way. Since you insist upon calling me something, you may as well say Miss Dick as anything else — "

"Gosh A'mighty!" Rangy's astonished voice broke in—"but excuse me, Miss."

"I was going to add that I will take off my mask upon one condition only," Miss Dick resumed, totally ignoring the interruption. "I find that I will need some help in a little undertaking."

Rangy nodded encouragingly.

"You couldn't have come to a better party," he admitted modestly, "not if you had looked all over the State. But what's the condition?"

"I will take off my mask when you have done something which I am going to ask you to do," she decreed, as her eyes studied Rangy's features shrewdly.

Rangy merely nodded for her to proceed.

"I want you to go back to Triple Butte with me and help me to get some evaporated apples — "

"My Gawd!" Rangy exclaimed fervently. "You'll have to excuse me this time, Miss Dick, but them 'vaporated apples are laying their lasso over my angora. You got the 'vaporated apple habit, too?"

"What do you mean by the evaporated apple

habit?" Miss Dick demanded. "This is no joke."

"I ain't noways likely to call it a joke," Rangy hastened to assure. "If it hadn't been for them apples, Merrill wouldn't have started after you road agents yesterday. He thought it was a heap of fun for Triple Butte to be held up until he heard about these apples being stole — "

Miss Dick interrupted with a quick nod of her head.

"If you look at it that way," she decided, "I am afraid I have the evaporated apple habit the same as Dan Merrill. Now, Mr. Pete, when do you think would be the best time to get that other box?"

Rangy began to toy absently with the tip of his left ear and when he looked at the girl it was with a certain wavering of doubt.

"The other box?" he repeated vaguely. "I don't understand how you come to sow them apples all over the trail yesterday and yet be hankering to get back to Triple Butte for more. That box didn't have a hole in it, did it?"

It seemed that the eyes behind the mask grew a trifle more friendly.

"It isn't that," Miss Dick explained carefully, "but those apples we got yesterday were not quite the right thing. When you have the evaporated apple habit, Mr. Pete, it doesn't take long to tell the difference. We got the wrong box."

"And you don't mean to say you're going back

for the right one?" Rangy demanded, quite caught off his guard.

Miss Dick nodded her assurance.

"Exactly what I am going to do," she pronounced confidently. "Why else do you think I stayed over there in the Pelican draw where any stray puncher might run across me? Perhaps I had better go alone, after all."

Rangy Pete hastened to lay his services at the lady's feet.

"Go alone?" he hurried to decry her intent. "Sakes alive, woman, you might just as well stand in front of a stampede. I know that little old joint of Triple Butte, and it'll be swarming like a beehive. No you don't, Miss, step into that hive alone. Besides, I know right where the other box is."

It almost appeared that Miss Dick gave a sigh of relief, though for a time she devoted her attention exclusively to Rangy's culinary efforts.

"So there is another box?" she reflected absently. "How do you know that, Mr. Pete?"

Still Rangy Pete's guard was so wide open that he lost no time in reciting the details of his rather disastrous sign-painting, and when these facts had been faithfully retold, he paused long enough to bask for a moment in the softened glow which seemed to shine from the girl's eyes.

"There's something I don't understand," he conceded, "but I wouldn't be surprised to find the

whole of Triple Butte and the half of Merrill's punchers standing guard over them apples. That means taking them out from under the noses of about fifty-sixty men — not counting the Double K or the Triangle O boys who may come shoving in. It's funny, Miss, how the folks back in Triple Butte ain't nohow set on stealing. They've got what you might call primitive prejudices about it, and it ain't so long ago that a fellow out there got his neck all tangled up with a lariat on account of stealing. All he took was about twenty-thirty horses, which ain't nothing like stealing a box of Dan Merrill's 'vaporated apples — ”

“Afraid?” the girl's voice was cold and distant. “Very well, I am sure I can manage it alone. All I ask is that you don't warn the people that I am coming.”

The situation, from the standpoint of Rangy Pete, was an unprecedented one. It occasioned him a cautious side glance at the girl's masked face in the hope of determining the extent of her sincerity, but all he could see definitely was the firm set of the chin and the cold glow of the blue eyes shining from beyond that annoying fold of cloth. From that he decided there was not the slightest suggestion of frivolity in the girl's face.

“I don't blame you for not wanting to eat Ike Collander's chopped pig-skin,” he affirmed his faith at length. “Ike ought to be strung up for keeping

that kind of stuff around, so, Miss Dick, if you want to get some of the sure-enough 'vaporated apples that Dan Merrill brings in, I'm with you."

To emphasize the point, Rangy extended a calloused hand across the rock which took the place of a table between them. The girl responded with a quick, firm grip of the fingers; and with the touch of the hand within his he suddenly felt the hot coursing of blood running riot within him, yet when he dropped her hand Miss Dick appeared totally unconscious of that swift flash of emotion within him.

"We will wait until dark," she decreed. "Now if you will keep watch I will get a little sleep. You can take your turn this afternoon."

Rangy shook his head reflectively as the girl made her way into the shadow land of the buttes, and in time he started to grumble to himself.

"All settled, just like that," he muttered. "Who's running this show, anyway? Here I come chasing bandits and before I know it the bandit's got me picked out for emergency work. Miss Dick, you mayn't know it, but you got such convincing ways that if you'd go to the gospel flail's tent in Triple Butte and lend him a hand, you'd have them hitting the sawdust trail so fast they'd wear out the track."

CHAPTER VI

As the events of the afternoon proclaimed, it was really Miss Dick who held the controlling hand. Around noonday, while the rays of the sun were still blistering their way over the tops of the buttes, the girl reappeared from her retreat in the shadow land and gave him rather definite instructions about taking a nap and making himself fit for the work of the night.

He paused only long enough to attempt to impress upon Miss Dick the folly of the enterprise. Triple Butte, he had learned by experience and observation, could sleep as soundly as any other inhabited portion of the world, but, once awakened, it could be decidedly peevish towards those who had broken in upon its vacuum of thought and effort.

And Dan Merrill of the Snaky Y, besides being peevish, could be vindictive.

"Two or three nights from now would be a whole lot better," Rangy tried to temper the girl's immediate enthusiasm for evaporated apples; but his efforts were only met by a decided shake of the head.

Miss Dick, it was obvious, had not altered her mind in the least about her hurried return to that center of awakened somnolence, and no amount of

talk about Triple Butte's lack of hospitality towards any member of the Dervishers appeared to make upon her the least impression.

Rangy contended the point with some vigor, and when he finally stretched out in a sheltered spot at the foot of the buttes he was somewhat astonished to find that it was concern for the girl's safety which had compelled his attitude. That was a matter difficult to understand, but Rangy attempted to put it from him with the explanation that Miss Dick was really his prisoner and that while she was in his custody it was simply his duty to protect her from all possible harm. That thought was so comforting that he had only a vague wonder if the girl would this time take advantage of her opportunity to escape. It was a flitting thought which came at the last moment before he fell into slumber, and which did not in the least disturb the peacefulness of his dreams. Those dreams were rather about the perversity of the prisoner, who persisted in dragging him into an undertaking which might prove dangerous to both of them, and who, it appeared through his fancy, clung to him in spite of all his efforts to cast her aside.

Rangy's dreams, strangely enough, had a lot to do with the queerness of Miss Dick, so it seemed quite natural that he should abruptly find himself in the half-way land between slumber and wakefulness and with the girl actually tugging at his

shoulders. The first thought which came to him was that she was using his sleep as a chance to rope him; but to what end his laboring brain did not say.

Then almost instantly he knew that theory must be a warped one, for Miss Dick, in addition to tugging at his shoulders, was shaking him vigorously and was whispering some keenly pitched words.

"For goodness' sake, Pete, hurry," she was exclaiming; "they're not ten minutes away from us."

Rangy sat up suddenly and his functioning brain swept out of its miasmic vapors into the immediate present.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, as his roving eye swept the full arc of the compass. "Who are you talking about?"

"A party of men, twenty or thirty, or more. They are riding our way. See that big ridge in the draw back towards the Pass? They swept over that not a minute ago —"

"You sure?" Rangy insisted, though he sprang to his feet even as he spoke.

For there could be but the one significance to the presence of a party of men riding down upon them from the direction of the butte lands. It would be the riders of the plains returning from their pursuit of the Dervishers and combing this draw in the search for strays. As for himself it did not matter. But Miss Dick? She would be one of those strays who would be welcomed by the feverish punchers

from the Snaky Y and by the awakened battlers of Triple Butte.

"We shore will hurry," he decided, as he noticed the tightness about the girl's lips. "Throw the things together while I catch that cayuse of mine."

The matter of saddling and mounting was but a brief interval snatched from time, yet when Rangy once more returned to Miss Dick he found that she was ready to ride at his side.

With barely a comment Rangy Pete led the way swiftly down the draw and when they came to the first ridge which commanded a view of the uncharted trail behind them, he paused long enough to study the tangled course which they had just followed.

"You're right, Miss Dick," he agreed, "that shore is a big party of riders back there, and — what a lubber I am!"

A sharp ejaculation of disgust accompanied this outburst, for Rangy had become painfully aware of the fact that this ridge, in addition to providing them with an observation tower, was threatening to prove their downfall. For now he knew that the figures of himself and the girl must be clearly silhouetted against the skyline; and his consciousness of that became an undoubted fact when that cluster of riders in the far background were seen to swing into closer contact and then pause as though startled.

But almost instantly they spurred forward at a

sharper pace, and when Rangy Pete saw that, he looked at the girl uncertainly.

"They're after us, all right," Miss Dick pronounced calmly. "Is there any speed in that yellow cayuse of yours? Thank goodness, it will soon be dark. If we can only hold them until dark — "

"That's what we've got to do," Rangy decided instantly. "This yellow boy isn't a world champion, but he can stay with it all day, and that counts. That bunch of riders can't be more than a mile behind, and there isn't a single offshoot from this draw between here and the plains which doesn't lead into a blind corner. Miss Dick, it's a case of race it out."

The girl nodded swiftly and through the slits in her mask Rangy caught a glimpse of shining eyes which seemed to have grown into hard points of aurelian blue. They were firm and clear and almost dazzling, and in that instant it even appeared to Rangy Pete that there was a fever of excitement in her veins which brought with it a thrill of gladness. Because of that, he wondered if the girl were really elated at the prospect of this mad dash for freedom.

While he thought of that, they rode swiftly down the draw, out towards the borderland of plains and buttes, into that land of shadows which had given this draw its name; and as they left the miles behind them, catching from time to time a glimpse of the

racing pursuers, Rangy became conscious of the strangeness of the situation.

"Why didn't you slope it away alone when you first saw them coming?" he asked at length. "You know it isn't me they're after."

Again the girl looked at him with those curious, dazzling lights in her eyes which spoke of the grateful thrill of excitement. That made him wonder still more at the problem of Miss Dick. Discretion and common sense, he felt, should prompt him to recognize that there are certain legal codes which are as inevitable as life itself, and to admit to himself that the law of the plains was a hundred times more swift and sure than any code of the law which had yet penetrated as far as Triple Butte.

Subconsciously, in the back of his brain, Rangy knew the interpretation which those trouble-lusting riders of the Snaky Y would put upon any association with the Dervishers, particularly when goaded on by the fire-breathing spirit of Dan Merrill, and there were men among the crew of the Snaky Y, chiefly Bill Sonnes and Merrill himself, who would be keen to fix upon him any calumny which chance provided. And here it was, ready made for their hands.

Down the lower slopes of the butte land draw they raced, and in the far distance they could catch glimpses of the chaparral-strewn plain in the shadows beyond. Behind them was that dashing cluster of

horsemen, more strung out than when first they had been sighted, but riding swiftly and furiously in the pursuit.

"They're gaining," Rangy pronounced solemnly, as they reached a crest in the trail which looked down into a barren area of tumbled rock stretching between them and the fringes of the plains. "They've closed up an eighth of a mile on us. What's wrong with that horse of yours, Miss Dick?"

"Stepped on a rolling stone," the girl explained gravely, and Rangy was conscious that her eyes now sought out his. When their glances met, he could be quite certain that some of the sparkle had gone and that silently she was putting before him the problem of her escape.

"He'll be better in a few minutes," Miss Dick declared hopefully; but as the minutes slipped away, it became too evident that improvement in the animal's condition was lacking.

That rolling stone had stripped from them the thin margin of advantage which had been theirs.

For a time, as he rode, Rangy glanced anxiously over his shoulder, then he studied the far spaces towards which they were racing, as though seeking to measure the elements of fact and chance. Quite plainly, Miss Dick was now relying upon him; and just as plainly, another hour's riding at their present rate would see the foremost rider of that party of punchers within fair gunshot of them — unless, of

course, Miss Dick's mount improved; but if it should suddenly become worse —?

Rangy Pete shook his head anxiously.

The shadows of night were beginning to settle about them; on the plains they would be deeper still; and off there, before them, rather better than an hour's ride away, was Triple Butte.

Yet what was to be gained by riding into Triple Butte? No, it was to be a matter of wits now.

"Listen, Miss Dick," Rangy spoke quickly, as he drew his horse closer to the girl. "This isn't a very purty box that we've stepped into. With that animal of yours holding down our speed, that herd of punchers is about due to be pumping bullets at us about a few minutes before it gets so dark they can't see to shoot. If it got dark, we'd sure give them the slip in the chaparral around the mouth of the draw, but it ain't thick enough to make a getaway as long as they's any light in the air. Now I've got an idea, Miss Dick."

"Well?" the girl encouraged, with brightening eyes.

"The next time we drop out of sight of the punchers, you just slip off your cayuse with all our grub and hide out on them Snaky Y buckos. They won't be looking for anybody, 'specially if they see the two horses riding on ahead. They'd be pumping after me and the two horses so fast that you wouldn't have any trouble at all. This cayuse, without anybody on its back, might be able to keep up to my yellow boy,

and if he could, me and yellow boy would shore lose them Snaky Y punchers in the chaparral so fast they'd wonder if we'd ever been alive. That sounds easy, Miss Dick. Then, soon's I'd lost this crew that's tagging after us, I'd come right back to you."

Quite obviously, Miss Dick was considering the proposition with extreme care. She looked behind her steadily, just as Rangy had done; she studied the far shadows of the plains which lay before, and she seemed to be looking anxiously into the higher lights of the dulling sky.

Then she shook her head sharply.

"Too dangerous," she decided. "Their riders are strung out so much that some of them would be sure to see me. Besides, they'd have pretty poor eyes if they didn't discover before long that one horse didn't have a rider. After that, you'll admit, they would be sharp enough to string a guard all along this draw; and how long would it be before you ever got back to me? Are you trying to starve me to death, Mr. Rangy Pete?"

Deliberation of the point seemed to establish the fact that Miss Dick was right. It was one chance gone; and still those thirsting riders behind them must be cutting down the lead with each passing minute.

Miss Dick's cayuse was not improving, though it appeared to be holding its own gamely. Rangy believed it was because of the manner in which the

girl leaned from time to time over its neck, patted its glossy shoulders and whispered strange words of affection into its listening ears. Through a space of time, while he watched that seeming intimacy between Miss Dick and her cayuse, Rangy forgot some of the keenness of the problem, for that was a rather delightful trait in the girl which he had not hitherto suspected.

"No, we will have to race it out." Miss Dick broke into his meditations. "I couldn't think of letting this horse fall into their hands. We have been friends too long for that. Mr. Pete, if you only know of a good big cluster of chaparral not too far away from here, and could plan to reach it just at dark, I am sure we would have but little more trouble dodging them. Searching chaparral at night is no easy job, not even for punchers."

The suggestion, Rangy was compelled to admit, had some merits, and in view of the impossibility of outriding the Snaky Y punchers with one hampered horse to hold them back, it appeared to be the only feasible solution. Yet it had its demerits.

"If I was chasing Dervishers with a flock of thirty men," Rangy decided aloud, "and they sloped it into a piece of chaparral just at dark, do you know what I'd do? I'd just throw my riders around that bit of a hiding place, and I'd hold them there until morning. Then it'd be, 'Out you come, Mr. Dervishers. We got a nice little rope all ready for you.' We can step

into the trap, Miss Dick, all right, but how are we going to step out of it?"

"That is your job," the girl pronounced with conviction; and back of the conviction there was a definite message of faith which once more set ablaze the riot of emotions in Rangy Pete's brain.

By the time that fever had cooled, they had swept past the limits of the Lone Shadow draw, out upon the first stretches of the plains, and because of that, he knew there was but the one chance before them. That was the suggestion of Miss Dick.

Then an abrupt thought assailed Rangy Pete.

For him, the way out could be simple. If he chose, he might ride into Triple Butte and proclaim the girl his prisoner. But that left a feeling of nausea which he did not attempt to understand. Instead, he gave himself up to a study of that problem which Miss Dick had so briefly put before him.

The girl was right. They must soon find shelter in the chaparral, for a backward glance showed him that the foremost riders were less than a half mile behind them now. And as yet, on these hill stretches of the plains, the chaparral was thin. There were still too many high lights in the sky which peered down and showed all too plainly the motions of men and of their mounts.

Less than a half mile behind them now! Dull, shadowy forms, racing out of the thickening shadows of the plains.

Directly before them was Triple Butte, a matter of five miles or more away. They could never make it now, no matter how keen might be the urge.

Miss Dick looked almost constantly over her shoulder now! And on those times when she turned to look into his eyes he could see an inquiring wonder upon those portions of her face which could be seen.

"There are more than thirty men behind us." Miss Dick spoke suddenly, and for the first time he fancied he found a slightly strained note in her voice.

But Rangy was thinking so swiftly now that he barely heeded her words. To the right of Triple Butte was a cluster of chaparral a hundred or more acres in extent, dense enough to suit their purpose. If only they could reach it before the maddened riders behind them came within reaching distance of a bullet!

"Can you get just a little more speed out of that cayuse?" he asked. "Just a little. We've got to veer to the right."

In answer, the girl leaned forward over the animal's neck; she patted it softly, and she whispered some pleading words in its ears which sounded almost like the melody of song.

With an effort the animal picked up a little extra speed, so that Rangy looked at the girl in wonder.

"Make him hold that," he declared, "and we

will strike that bit of chaparral you see to the right just about the time the punchers start to fire at us."

From that time on the course swerved to the right until shortly the darkened smudge of chaparral, which stood out blurred and indistinct through the growing darkness, was directly in line between them and Triple Butte. Behind them, so close now that the maddened tramp of the galloping animals sounded like the pounding of surf upon the sands, came the troop of punchers. They were breaking into tongue now, like the yelping of hounds. They were dull splashes of vitality plunging through the gloom.

For a moment Rangy watched them curiously, measuring the distance between them, the distance to the chaparral.

"We'll make it," he declared, with elevation; and almost as he spoke there came the dull snap of a barking revolver behind them.

"They seem to know it," Miss Dick replied calmly.

Just a few hundred yards to that chaparral now! Behind them the leaders in the chase were firing more steadily, persistently, as though they recognized the futility of immediate pursuit.

Only one danger now! And that the chance of a stray bullet finding its mark. Accurate shooting was out of the question. Speed would have made that impossible, even had the cloaking of night not

been about them, dulling and blurring their flying figures and making the goal of those searching bullets nothing but the whim of fate.

"Listen, please." Rangy began to speak swiftly. "I have a plan. But we must work fast. We will make the chaparral now and the first man is four hundred yards behind. We plunge straight through it, as fast as we can make it, as quiet as we can. It isn't far. And then you will do exactly as I say?"

"Yes," the girl agreed quickly, but there was nothing subdued in her tones.

Even in that moment of crisis it almost seemed to Rangy Pete that she was entrusting herself to his keeping merely through some strange fancy of her own, to see if he had the wits to bring her through this period of danger.

Abruptly the denser shadows of the chaparral closed about them, while a chorus of bullets whined their way through the night.

"Dismount and follow me," Rangy instructed; and shortly they were feeling their way as swiftly and as silently as possible through the protecting growth.

Behind them, at the edge of the chaparral, was the maddened clatter of confused voices as the foremost riders dashed up to the barrier of protection and then paused uncertainly. For some time that clamoring of voices continued, as rider after rider swung up to the chaparral and added his confusion

to the earlier sounds. Presently there came the sound of horses plunging into the trees after them, and that caused Rangy Pete to chuckle audibly.

"Shore enough, old boys, come right along," he encouraged in a whisper which reached Miss Dick's ears. "The more time you waste chasing up this way, the longer it'll take you to get your wits together long enough to know you should be loping it around to the other side of this bush. Faster, Miss Dick!"

As he felt his way through the chaparral, Rangy was listening intently to those sounds which came from the Snaky Y punchers, and he was seeking to read the meaning of all the confused voices.

A hundred more yards now to the clear edge of the barrier of tree growth, and beyond that — ?

"They've started to ride around to this edge now," Rangy decided abruptly, "but it is five times as far around as it is through, and we're nearly at the open. Steady, Miss Dick, not a sound now."

"Where are you going?" the girl demanded. "This horse can't go much farther tonight."

"He won't have to if we get an even break in the luck, and if you got your nerve with you," Rangy proclaimed. "Now you're at the very edge and those buckos haven't come into sight yet. Do you know what's gonna happen, Miss? I've got an idea that I'm gonna join in the chase and help burn them Dervishers out — "

The girl laughed in sudden comprehension.

"Fine!" she exclaimed. "But how?"

"Listen. There isn't a second to lose." Rangy spoke with swift intent. "You couldn't get away yet — not quite dark enough. I got to put them off the track. You stay here. When you see the way open, you back your horse out. Ride around Triple Butte — bunch of chaparral to the east, ten acres of it. Meet me there on the far side of it — get there as soon as I can — Good luck, little Blue Eyes."

Even as he spoke, Rangy Pete was backing the burnt-yellow cayuse out from the sheltering fringe of the chaparral into the smouldering gloom of the early night. He backed the animal as swiftly as it could travel in this unusual pose, and he kept its head turned towards that curve of the chaparral-bordered night from which the riders of the Snaky Y must shortly loom. It could be a matter of but two or three minutes at the most, he knew, before the first of the riders would swing around that out-jutting crop of chaparral some three hundred yards distant, and from that point gain a clear view of himself.

While he backed the cayuse towards Triple Butte, Rangy Pete chuckled to himself somewhat grimly.

"Boy, we shore got to use our head tonight," he addressed the astonished animal, "but I'm thinking, when they first catch sight of you, with your nose turned towards them, they won't nowise think that you've ever had anything to do with Dervishers.

"They'll set you down as running in from Triple Butte to help them."

There, by the night-dulled cluster of chaparral, was the darting shadow of the foremost of the riders.

Rangy Pete shook the reins of the burnt-yellow cayuse and dashed towards those advancing riders with a great clatter of noise.

"You got them?" he demanded, as he slithered the cayuse into a halt directly in their path.

"Got them nothing!" the voice of Bill Sonnes returned testily. "Oh, it's you, Rangy! Did them Dervishers ride out on this side?"

"They shore haven't, though I been expecting them to do it. Now look alive, fellows. Throw the posse all around this bunch of chaparral, and we got them, snug in a trap. Ride on, Sonnes, and string your men out. And for goodness' sake make it fast, or the Dervishers will slip away on that far corner."

Sonnes jerked at his reins impatiently, with a degree of fire which told that the blood-lust was burning hot within him. He was almost in the act of dashing on when Rangy checked him with a sharp word.

"You lost your head, Sonnes?" he demanded. "Why don't you send a man to ride back the way you come, and post guards around the other way till you two parties meet?"

The man's reply was an impatient oath.

"Here, Merker," he exclaimed, "Rangy's right. You string back the way you come, pick up the riders and scatter them along, one every few hundred yards. Step fast, Merker. We got them Dervishers in a trap, and if they ain't dangling by the neck before morning you can call me a greaser."

This time Sonnes applied the spurs, and Rangy had to raise his voice to check the man's speed.

"And Sonnes," he shouted, "the wind's blowing across the chaparral from the other side. Set it afire as soon as you get the posse all strung out ready — "

"You're a live one!" Sonnes bellowed back over his shoulder, as he and a party of riders raced on into the growing darkness of the night.

Rangy Pete turned about to find Merker still at his side, while another of the belated riders was already racing towards them.

"It's easy, Merker," Rangy exclaimed, "but we got to work fast. You slope it back as Sonnes said, and post your riders. I'll stand guard from here to that point of chaparral you see sticking out down there a ways. You post your first man just past that, and tell him to keep his eyes on the dark spots. Them Dervishers have got to ride out this way some time. Now make it fast, Merker!"

There was so much crispness in Rangy's tones, and such an air of authority, that apparently the man Merker did not have so much as a thought of

hesitancy. He dashed away in the opposite direction to that taken by Sonnes, picked up the second rider on the way, and in a minute or more he disappeared around the curve of shadow into the gloom of the night.

Rangy Pete heaved a sigh of relief.

With the Snaky Y punchers working so frantically to throw a cordon about the cluster of chaparral and accepting his proffered services so unquestioningly, there was now but the one rider within sight of him. That man was the first of the guards posted by Sonnes, a young puncher stationed some three hundred yards down the edge of the chaparral.

It was growing swiftly dark, though it was not quite dark enough for Miss Dick to ride out of her shelter and vanish into the blackness to the north of Triple Butte. Another quarter of an hour and it would be perfectly safe. She could step out of the shadows into the cloak of night and be lost forever to those eager punchers whose brains were fevered now by the pursuit.

What a fire was running in their veins! As he thought of that, Rangy Pete shuddered at the prospect of Miss Dick falling into their hands. For if such had been her fate — if his wits had failed him in that moment of crisis — he could see quite clearly that those slightly maniacal punchers might easily have inflicted the final punishment of death before they discovered that she was a woman.

Rangy shivered again; then he laughed softly.

A few minutes more and Miss Dick's last danger would be over. Already the figure of that guard at his right had become so smothered by the cloakings of night that Rangy could distinguish his form only when he moved. A few minutes more and the night would have blotted out even the movements of either rider or mount!

And that was just as it should be. In Rangy's blood there was running the thrill of victory. This last chapter of the chase had been timed to perfection; for just a few minutes after Miss Dick rode out of her shelter into safety, the chaparral would be set ablaze from the far side. And that blaze would be a curious thing, for it would provide still more protection for the retreat of Miss Dick. Miss Dick, being beyond the range of the blaze, would be in the shelter of shadows impenetrable to those watching eyes.

Yes, it had worked out with astonishing success. Five minutes more, and Miss Dick —

A rider dashing down upon him from the left, from beyond that point of chaparral! The slithering of a rider stopping beside him!

Rangy Pete felt all the elation swept from him and in its place there came the cold chill of augury. For the man was Dan Merrill, head of the Snaky Y. So it must be a case of wits again.

"Hello, Dan," Rangy greeted casually. "Got them yet?"

Merrill's reply was a bellowing sound. "You wasn't in our posse," he declared. "What you doing here?"

"Catching Dervishers same's the rest of you," Rangy replied easily, though his right hand dropped negligently towards his hip and rested there, as though weary of effort. "If you wasn't so het up, Merrill, I'd be calling your attention to the fact that you ain't got no right to bellow at me. I'm not on your string of riders and I go and come when I like. I saw your fancy chase across the ranges from where I happened to be, so I sloped it here as quick as I knew how. Sonnes left me here on guard; but don't think I'm telling you this, Merrill, because I have to tell you anything. I'm my own boss, understand that. I take orders from myself and if the rest of the world doesn't like it — "

Rangy finished his sentence only by the outward jerking of his left hand, and by a shrug of the shoulders. The right hand, Merrill could not help but observe, still rested annoyingly near a certain bulge by the hip. And even Dan Merrill, big and dark and quick tempered as he was, recognized through the heat of his passions that Rangy's hand, when in that particular position, was not a thing to be trifled with.

"Seems to me you got here mighty quick." Merrill's voice contained its sneer, which Rangy chose to overlook.

"Shore, this little cayuse has got the speed. Gonna buy him off me, Dan?"

Yet while he spoke with pleasant indifference, Rangy Pete was inwardly fuming at the presence of Merrill and at the loss of time. By now it was dark enough for Miss Dick to make an effective escape, and except for the presence of this burly person in front of him, the girl would already be riding off there into the shadows.

Merrill's arrival had been most untimely. Through the flash of his thoughts Rangy could envision the disaster which the man's presence might entail. Within a very few minutes that chaparral must be ablaze on the far side, with its flames mounting to the sky and robbing the girl of the advantage of the night. What a fool he had been to suggest such a thing! For this chaparral, dry and tindery through the many blisterings of the sun, would burn like straw. It would flare swiftly to the sky and throw the glare of fire all about them.

Rangy's lips grew straight in spite of the banter of his voice. Merrill or no Merrill, Miss Dick must be out of that trap within the next five minutes or her last chance would be gone.

Merrill or no Merrill! In the flash of that prompting the urge was strong upon him to pick a swift quarrel with this arrogant owner of the Snaky Y, who would doubtless be keen to inflict punishment upon a woman the same as upon a man. A quarrel

in this moment of Merrill's roiled passions would be such an easy thing. A fight in the dark! Rangy did not shrink from the prospect, but somehow or other it seemed to be folly. This, rather, should be a game of wits.

"His head seems to be drooping a bit," Merrill's sneering voice went on critically. "I'm thinking, Rangy Pete, that you've rode that cayuse a whole lot farther than from Triple Butte. You didn't, by any chance, ride him from the Lone Shadow draw?"

Rangy Pete turned his head aside. The insinuation of that remark was a biting thing. Still, how was he supposed to know there was any insinuation in it at all?

"The Lone Shadow draw?" he reflected; and even as he spoke, he could see the first faint lightening at the edges of the shadows on the far side of the chaparral. "Seems to me I have been there, but I don't quite place it — "

It was only with a strained effort that Rangy could command his voice. Already the chaparral was on fire. In a very few minutes now the blaze would be intense. And Merrill was still standing between Miss Dick and safety!

"It's out past the Pelican, ain't it — sakes alive! The chaparral's on fire. See, Dan, over your shoulder there."

Merrill swung about and in that instant the guard

posted by Sonnes rode through the shadows and disappeared. Rangy Pete knew what the outlines of that man's form might do for him.

Instantly he became a fever of excitement.

"Gad, Merrill!" he exclaimed, "there they are. Didn't you see that shadow? We'll get them, Merrill, if there's anything more to you than a bunch of bluster. Come!"

Rangy's excitement, though artificial, was nevertheless effective and contagious. He slapped the cayuse into quick action and darted swiftly in the direction of the shadow which had caught Merrill's eye. As he rode into the night, Rangy emitted a great volume of vocal sound.

"We got to keep them in the chaparral till it gets lighter!" he exclaimed, as he glanced back over his shoulder and saw that the feverish Merrill was immediately behind him.

Rangy rode directly away from Miss Dick's position, with Merrill at his cayuse's heels, and he dashed up to the edge of the chaparral, firing bullets into the ground as he went.

Just there he glanced once more over his shoulder, and as he looked he caught the fitting of another shadow which rode swiftly out of the chaparral and vanished into the night towards the north. That brought to him the keen warmth of victory. That was why his voice was elated when he shouted again at Merrill —

"We drove them back, Dan, old boy! We'll get them yet!"

"We musta drove them back," Merrill admitted, "for they're not here."

At that instant the guard rode up beside them, and Rangy Pete, looking out across the chaparral, saw the first thin tongue of flame leaping towards the sky. But Miss Dick, he knew, was beyond its menace. And because of that he sighed softly and he felt an intense glow about the region of the heart which he did not attempt to understand.

"They'll never get away now," Merrill gloated, and Rangy felt a sensation of revulsion at the sound of the voice.

Still he answered —

"Never. We shore got them trapped."

CHAPTER VII

WHILE the last reddening gleam of the burning chaparral was flickering across the sky, Rangy Pete rode around to the north of Triple Butte and came upon that small cluster of tree-growth where Miss Dick should be awaiting him.

He thought of Dan Merrill, big, swarthy, arrogant, domineering, burned by the passions of life, young enough to be virile, old enough to be wily, grasping enough to be unscrupulous, successful enough to be daring, cold enough to rule his men with an iron hand; and he wondered if Merrill, in all his shrewdness, would be keen enough to find any association between him, Rangy Pete, and the failure of that burning chaparral to drive any Dervishers into the open.

That was something which the future would have to answer; for he had not waited to see. Yet if Merrill should guess the truth, then the uncharted days yet to come would not be pleasant things.

But for the present the problem was that of Miss Dick.

As he rode towards that small clump of chaparral, Rangy found that his emotions were in a tumult of

conflict. He hoped she would be there waiting for him, and yet that hope was almost a fear.

It was not right that Miss Dick, though a bandit, should have her emotions fed upon excitement such as that through which they had just squeezed with such narrow margin; but when he drew near to the trysting place Rangy told himself that the blue-eyed one, if here, would now be quite content to ride back to the tumbled land of hills and valleys which lay beyond the Pass.

At the extreme tip of the chaparral he found her, standing by the side of the horse and gazing off towards the dying embers of that night fire. She recognized him instantly as he drew near.

"You surely had your wits about you tonight, Mr. Pete," she complimented easily, "so I am certain we will not have a bit of trouble getting that box of evaporated apples."

Rangy Pete mumbled something in his throat which was strangely like the rumblings of astonishment. For a moment he gazed at the shaded outlines of her face, and the tip of his fingers strayed up to toy with his left ear.

"Then you haven't had enough of it?" he asked uncertainly. "I figured you shorely would have."

The girl laughed lightly, as though the promise of the future were a relish.

"It isn't that," she explained, "but there is no time like the present. Triple Butte will be too

excited to think much about Ike Collander tonight, so how soon do you think we had better be going?"

Still Rangy stared for a time.

"Who said anything about 'we'?" he burst out, at last. "Miss Dick, I'm thinking the best thing you can do is to slope it out of sight as fast as you know how. But before you go, I'd shore take it as a compliment if you'd take off that mask and give me one little peek at your face. I ain't got no memory for faces at all. I'd forget it before you were outa sight."

"Your compliments are remarkable for their directness," the girl broke in. "First you tell me I am the most homely woman you have ever met, and now you say you could forget me even before my back was turned."

A definite consciousness of inferiority seemed to assail Rangy Pete, so that for a time all he could do was stand and grin.

"You go picking me up wrong," he protested, at length. "I'm just wanting you to slope it so you won't get hurt. What I'm telling you is no joke. Triple Butte won't be healthy tonight for strangers. The red-eye will be running about as fast as a dozen men can lap it up, and before we could get there the folks'll be having that feeling that makes them shoot first and ask questions after."

"You really mean it?" Miss Dick exclaimed with enthusiasm. "Then we couldn't possibly find a

better night. I am glad you told me, Mr. Pete, for I have been waiting for a long time to see a town on the loose — isn't that what you call it? How soon can we get away?"

Rangy's protests were vehement and prolonged. They took the form of a detailed word-picture of the glee which the Merrill punchers would find in any victory over the Dervishers, however small; but though he grew quite eloquent and really surprised himself, Miss Dick merely stood waiting impatiently until he had finished.

"You do seem particularly anxious to keep me out of Triple Butte tonight," she mused. "Is there anything special there you don't want me to see?"

"There shore is," he grinned; "it's the calaboose. It don't look so uninviting from the outside, but it ain't ever been the same since Buck Menzie spent a night there. Buck got into an argument with a window and the place has been draughty ever since. Besides, that Buzzard Flynn person is most apt to be yowling around there tonight."

"You are entirely too thoughtful," Miss Dick interrupted. "I have reached this stage without a guardian — "

"And ain't you thinking it's about time somebody took you in hand?" Rangy interjected, in his turn.

Miss Dick stood quite still, looking at Rangy through the night until he fancied that the cold

blue of her eyes began to glitter through the slits of her mask.

"Might you be thinking of trying it?" she asked calmly; then she rushed on more impetuously, "For I wouldn't advise you to."

For the first time since meeting with this feminine road agent, Rangy became conscious of a feeling of irritation; but that was rather at his own inability to cope with her moods.

"You seem to be forgetting, Miss, that you're my prisoner," he retorted, with a suggestion of outward rankle.

"How like a man!" The girl's mood swung back to quick laughter. "Now that it is all settled, don't you think we had better be starting? The reflection of that fire has quite died out and everybody must be in Triple Butte by this time."

Without a word Rangy turned his cayuse towards the town and the girl swung in at his side. For a time they rode thus through the silence, while from the vastness of the world the only sound which reached them was the crunching of the horses' hoofs. Over earth and sky there was the blur of darkness, while the silence seemed to rise up and press about them like the intangible spirit of the vast plains. It was a strange silence, which seemed to whisper to the man that in the whole great world there were but two human beings, himself and this queer girl at his side. To Rangy Pete it brought a touch of

loneliness, accustomed though he was to the solitude of the hills and of the plains, and it roused within him feelings which he could not understand.

Rangy sighed through the darkness. Tonight he would play the woman's game; and tomorrow — ?

Abruptly he shook his head with a keener consciousness of the present and of the peril of that thing which the girl purposed to do. With that, the passion of fear for her rose up to grip him.

"You're not going in to Triple Butte," he heard himself saying, in a voice so stern as to be almost that of a stranger. "You're going to stay out behind the corrals, for if you don't, I'll rope you."

"All right, Rangy," the girl's voice came back meekly, so meekly that he found himself once more astonished at the strange whims of womankind.

But it was a meekness of which he speedily took advantage, so that shortly he had picked out a perfectly safe place for Miss Dick to await his return.

"I will give you an hour," the girl declared in a whisper, as he made ready to ride away. "After that, I will consider myself free again. Remember, I am a person of my word. No trifling. I want that box of evaporated apples."

"Time to spare," Rangy returned in a confident whisper; and shortly he was riding swiftly towards Triple Butte. By the time he reached the outlying shacks strung along the single highway, he became more and more convinced that the time was not

opportune for the burglarizing of Ike Collander's or any one else's premises. The whole of Triple Butte, and the punchers for miles around, it seemed, had gathered along this dusty highway, in a condition which appeared like fluctuating excitement.

There were so many strange cayuses and such a blaring of human voices that Rangy vanished into the darkness at the side of the buildings and felt his way along to the rear of Collander's storeroom.

Merrill's box of apples, as nearly as he could remember, had been placed on top of a pile of similar boxes near the rear doorway, so in view of the excitement out in front, the work of pillage should be comparatively simple.

An important thing, however, would be to know the exact location of Ike Collander; for Ike's theory, he knew, was to shoot and then to investigate afterwards. Still, there were no side windows through which to spy upon Collander.

"There's nothing like being a fool for caution," Rangy informed himself, as he appreciated the necessity of taking a chance on the whereabouts of his employer. "There's one thing counting my way, for if Ike shoots, he's just as apt to hit the ceiling as the floor."

The back door was locked, but his personal key negotiated that difficulty. Rangy stole forward and half way up the room he stumbled against a package and some article fell to the floor with a thud.

For a time Rangy froze in his tracks, listening intently for the faintest sounds from the room beyond. There came a scraping sound which may have been made by the explorations of a strange dog or which may have signified the awakening of Ike Collander. The sounds drew nearer, approached the door, paused, then went away again.

"Couldn't a been Ike," Rangy decided, "for he would have moseyed right in."

Thus self-comsoled, Rangy Pete began to move about more swiftly. He reached the pile of evaporated apple boxes without further mishap, and on the top, where he had put it, he found a crate which, through the darkness, seemed to be the Merrill box. There was a smooth strip of something along the surface, which must be the splashing of red paint; and there was —

Sudden footsteps in the store in front of him. Hurried footsteps which seemed to have a purpose in life! Other hurried footsteps at the side of the store — running men — at both sides of the store —

"Of all the plumb idiots!" Rangy grappled with the situation with frantic haste. "I do believe they're surrounding the place, and with me inside, what's supposed to be somewhere else!"

Rangy thought of the door, but those running footsteps, he knew, had cut off his retreat, provided, of course, he happened to be the object of their interest. Exit by the main store was likewise cut

off by those other tramping feet. For a rapid instant Rangy experienced the sensation of a trapped animal. Then abruptly he grinned to himself through the darkness.

"Rangy," he admonished, "if you ain't most nigh as big an idiot as the rest of them. You jest got to go to sleep, peaceful like, and that's all there's to it."

Through the convenient pause, while the footsteps stopped outside either doorway, Rangy worked rapidly. He stripped off his coat almost at the same instant that he felt out hurriedly with his hands. There was a huge crate of dry goods which had arrived a few days previous and which he had helped to place in the storeroom. This crate, he knew, provided an admirable barrier to bullets, if only Ike Collander had not been musing about in his absence. For the crate, as he left it, was quite out of the line of fire from either doorway.

Rangy's hands came into contact with wood.

"Ike shore is a little prince for once," Rangy decreed, as he found the crate undisturbed.

Even as he rolled up his coat, Rangy dropped down behind the crate and stretched out at full length upon the flooring.

Through a labored breathing, assumed for the benefit of his new audience, Rangy listened intently for developments. It was obvious now that the storeroom was the center of attraction, for there were gentle scratchings at either doorway.

"They're shore mightily slow horning their way in," Rangy reflected. "They ain't none of them being dead set on crowding the others out, and that's what I call being rare polite. I wouldn't be surprised if they had all gone loco and got the idea that I'm a Dervisher or something like that."

From the direction of the main store there came a noise which indicated that the door was being opened, cautiously, an inch at a time. Rangy, peering beyond the edge of the crate, looked for a face in the doorway, but there was not even the streak of light which should have accompanied the opening of the door.

So their nerves were on edge! They were serious, after all! They had even darkened the room beyond.

With this discovery Rangy applied himself a trifle more industriously to making the sounds of slumber. From creakings at the other end of the room he could tell that the rear door was also being pushed open with extreme caution. Presently there was a voice from the direction of the store. It was not in the doorway, he could tell that; for it must be sheltered somewhere out beyond. It was the voice of Sheriff Stipples, arrogant, but with its body amply protected.

"You might as well come out, you blooming highway gent, for we've got the place surrounded. And don't try any little shooting game, or we'll

string you up so high the birds'll get dizzy goin' after yore bones."

Sheriff Stipples bellowed his command with such vigor that Rangy wondered if he were still justified in assuming the pose of slumber. He might be excused for waking, he knew that, and for calling out some message which would end the man-hunt. But that was not entirely satisfying. If Triple Butte really had an attack of the nerves, he would like ample proof of it.

So Rangy hunched his legs into the certain protection of the dry-goods box and he attempted a noise like a man who is disturbed in his slumbers.

"He's there all right, fer I heard him move." Rangy heard a peppery voice which he recognized as that of Ike Collander. "I'm goin' in after him, I tell you."

"You wanta get yore hide full of holes?" Stipples protested. "Hey, you fellers at the back, keep away from the door, fer I'm a gonna turn my gun loose if he ain't come out by the time I count three. Listen, you bloomin' bandit, I'm a countin' three, kinda slow, to give you time to think it over, an' if you ain't a marchin' up to this door afore I've said three, I'll be searchin' you out with lead."

Sheriff Stipples paused. Through the pause, Rangy Pete, with full confidence in the crate of dry goods, shifted again.

"I heard you, feller," Stipples bellowed again.

"I know right where you are, an' I'm soon gonna send a flock of lead your way. One — Two — Three!"

Stipples was as good as his word.

There was a rattle of shots and a storm of lead came hurtling into the room.

The shots were accompanied by an extravagant sound of breaking crockery and by the wreck of other articles of a fragile nature. They were also echoed by the excited voice of Ike Collander.

"You ain't gonna do any more of that, Stipples, I'm telling you!" Collander was shouting out his protests. "You've most mabbe ruined me now by the things you broke. I'm going in there — "

Rangy Pete decided that it was time to awake from his slumbers.

"Hey, you tarnation idiots! What's going on out there?" he roared, giving volume to his demand in order that there could be no doubt as to his identity. "Can't a fellow go to sleep nowhere in this town but what somebody's got to come saluting him with artillery?"

From the silence which followed, Rangy knew that his voice had carried its own surprise into the ranks beyond. He knew, also, that the moment was opportune for deploying upon his assailants. So he rose, and with coat dragging after him in one hand he sauntered out into the darkened store.

"Hey, Ike, what's going on here?" he demanded,

in a voice purposely hard and cold and suspicious. "Somebody been shooting at you, Ike? For if they have — "

Rangy paused for the sake of impression only.

"Light up, Ike," he ordered, in tones more harsh than before. "It's all right, Ike. I got that bunch covered. Hands up, you gents! Strike a match, Ike. And you other gents, if I don't see yore hands pawing for the ceiling when I see you first, I'll be taking it that you got a hankering for the lead treatment."

Ike Collander's strain of perversity promptly showed itself.

Ike knew that he might have relieved the situation by the use of a few well chosen words, but instead of using words he struck a match to a coal-oil lamp. The flickering taper revealed the outlines of a small cluster of men with arms raised discreetly aloft and with that particular grin upon their lips which is generally described as sheepish.

Rangy Pete, with a six-gun in his right hand, and with his coat dangling from the other, eyed them coldly, with unsmiling deliberation.

"I'm counting a whole lot of gents what has a pile of judgment," he began. "No you don't, Buck Menzie. Keep them up, for I'm thinking you ain't got the price to go buying wooden kimonos. Lefty, there ain't nothing so healthful as sticking the fingers in the air and kinda reaching up. It's good for the constitushun when there's a gent looking at

you from the wrong end of a bit of artillery. Now, Ike, it's yore turn to wag yore little tongue. Don't be afraid, Ike. Tell me what it's all about, for they ain't nobody gonna hurt daddy's little boy now. What one of the said gents with the peace sign stuck up has been trying to go to wasting lead on you?"

Ike Collander was temperamentally inclined to enjoy the situation to some greater length, but a glance from Sheriff Stipples seemed to imply that his present conduct, if unfavorable, would be checked up against him for future use.

"You big lummux!" Ike roared out, "was that you in the storeroom alla time?"

"Whether I'm me or somebody else ain't got nothing to do with it," Rangy decreed. "What I'm getting sort of impatient about is who's been so permiskuous with lead in little Ike's store. Don't you be afraid, Ike, for if any of these buckos has been trying to make you dance some — "

"Was you alone in there?" Collander demanded with vigor. "And what do you mean by coming sneaking around that way without letting me know? How's I to know you wasn't one of them Dervishers come back?"

Rangy permitted a little of the severity to relax from his features.

"Seeing that Ike can't talk straight, you can set yore tongue to working, Mr. Sheriff," he addressed

Stipples, "and the quicker you let me know what's been happening —"

"Ike musta got a touch of the willics; that's all I know about it," Stipples broke in hurriedly. "He come running out into the street saying there's some Dervishers in the back room, so we kinda surrounded the place. It's me what fired into the room. Didn't you hear me bidding you to come out?"

Rangy Pete slipped his gun back into its holster and a grin came to his lips.

"You can all take down the peace flags, gents," he returned. "Shore, I heard something, Sheriff. But being asleep, I kinda thought it was a funny dream. That's what made me peevish, to be woke up that way. And ain't Ike the queer little cuss? Ike's shore gotta pay for thinking I'm a Dervisher, and since you gents has appointed me judge, I'll say Ike's gotta take us all over to Tony Burke's and set them up for the bunch. What you say, gents?"

Even to Ike Collander the solution seemed to be a happy one. For experience had taught him that the surest way to still the ridicule of such an incident would be to drown its memory in red-eye. At the front doorway they met the three punchers from the Snaky Y who had formed the attacking party at the rear, and though there was marked disappointment in their manner, it vanished the moment they learned the nature of the punishment which Rangy had inflicted upon Collander.

To Rangy Pete also the solution seemed feasible, for with these curious ones safely deposited in Tony Burke's saloon, it should be a relatively simple matter to slip from their midst, continue his pillage of the Collander store, and return to Miss Dick all within the time limit of an hour.

But if he failed in that? A slight tremor of doubt swept over him and for the moment left him cold and speechless.

On the way a number of curious citizens who had been attracted by the sound of firing were included in Collander's punishment, and that was gratifying to Rangy Pete. The larger the number, the better would be his opportunities for escape from their importunities. The quicker would be his return to Miss Dick.

As they crossed the highway Rangy glanced down the dusty thoroughfare and wondered idly at the number of cayuses strung along the hitching-posts. Doubtless their owners had been drawn by that recent fire in the chaparral and now they were remaining to add to that spasmodic burst of excitement which had so suddenly gripped the citizens of Triple Butte.

Cayuses dotted the whole length of the town's roadway — and there, in front of the Hash Knife saloon, a black cluster of horses whose number astonished him. Then almost instantly his brows drew together in a worried frown. That would be

the punchers from the Double K, the boys of his old association, the boys with whom he had ridden and worked and fought, until the recent anger of old Calvin Bracken had sent him along his way.

Rangy Pete's devotion to the Double K still remained, and that is why the frown deepened upon his brow. For never yet, in his memory, had the Double K and the Snaky Y punchers come together in force without the red of blood dyeing the event and planting still deeper the roots of the old feud which in his day had stamped out so many lives.

The Double K at the Hash Knife and the Snaky Y at Tony Burke's! Just a few hundred yards separating them from the untold possibilities of the future.

On another occasion he might have welcomed that situation, with all its thrill of temporary madness; but tonight, with Miss Dick waiting for him out there at the edge of the chaparral, and with the minutes swiftly flying away, it was quite a different thing. If only he knew what Miss Dick would really do, in case he did not return within the hour!

And here was himself, an old member of the Double K, walking calmly into the danger of Tony Burke's saloon. He had scarcely thought of that before, but now there was with him the sudden memory that already he was more than half suspected by Dan Merrill. Rough House Dan had been sneering when they two were alone out there on the chaparral. What would he be now, reinforced

by a crew of his punchers, when he had had the time to ponder more deeply upon Rangy's recent actions?

All that came to Rangy in a flash and it was with him even while Stipples, by virtue of his office, pushed his way forward to the bar.

"These here gents are all under arrest," Stipples announced in a loud voice. "They're all arrested and brought to the bar, and the punishment what's coming to them is to keep on swallowing the red-eye as long as Lefty Merker can hand it out. Lefty, you go even with the bunch, and when you start spilling the drinks the arrests are over. The first is on Ike Collander, and after that, any gent what's got a kindly feeling in his heart can join the bunch by slipping the right password to Lefty Merker. The password 'll be — 'This one's on me, Lefty.' Come, gents, they ain't even ringers barred."

Immediately in front of the party were Merrill and Bill Sonnes, leaning negligently against the bar and adopting an annoying air of proprietorship. Rangy cast a quick glance about and decided that the air was doubtless justified, judging by the amount of support which Merrill and Sonnes had scattered about the huge room. There were Snaky Y punchers everywhere.

Merrill's glance met his coldly, then traveled on to the rest of the party.

"What you so cocky about, Stipples?" Merrill

demanded arrogantly. "You been catching some more Dervishers?"

The demand necessitated an explanation; and Rangy Pete, watching Merrill shrewdly, could see that the working of his frequent potations was having its usual effect upon the man. At this particular stage Merrill was inclined to unbend; he even looked at Rangy with a tolerant, judicial eye, which reserves judgment, and he consented to laugh harshly at the story which Stipples had to tell.

But Rangy knew that was for the present only. The future libations of Dan Merrill, he knew from experience, would shortly have an entirely different effect. Ordinarily it would amuse him to see the situation through; but tonight, with Miss Dick awaiting him impatiently somewhere out in the darkness —

In that instant Rangy decided upon discretion.

"What you've been saying sounds all right, Stipples," he inserted, "but such an important event as this should not be pulled off without a referee. Now, what gent'll volunteer to keep his throat dry and then say who wins the bout?"

The sacrificial role of the referee was such a shock to the gathering that volunteers were totally lacking, though the suggestion won its measure of approval.

"Seeing there's no self-sacrificing gent in the crowd, I'll be taking on them public-spirited duties myself," Rangy pronounced, and in doing so he

won the temporary fervor of popularity. "Now set them up, Lefty, and make it fast."

With the bout well under way and with Merrill's passing mellowness still tolerating his presence, Rangy began to take swift stock of the situation. Another fifteen minutes and the condition of the drinkers would be such that he would not be missed. He could then slip away, fulfil his policy of pillage, and leave the future to decide that troublesome problem of Miss Dick.

Fifteen minutes more, and that would leave him time to spare.

Things, in spite of obstacles, were working out satisfactorily; if only there were no further complications!

One gratifying feature was that there were no Double K punchers in the saloon. Doubtless they were all down at the Hash Knife, carrying out a duplication of this particular scene. In that instant he wondered if it would be policy to slip down to the Hash Knife in an effort to start the Double K boys on their way home; but before he had decided that point he found his attention drawn by a pair of eyes resting upon him from the far end of the room.

It was with the sensation of surprise that he recognized the lean, leathery face about those eyes.

Ring'em Foster in Triple Butte!

Ring'em Foster of the Triangle O, and about him,

in the remote corner of the bar, were four other men, all tall, leather-faced punchers like himself.

Rangy sauntered in their direction. It was rather a daring thing, he knew, for Ring'em Foster of the Triangle O to appear in the same room with Dan Merrill of the Snaky Y, for his memory was most vivid with the details of their last meeting. It was a heated moment, that last meeting, when Merrill, caught off his guard, had looked down the barrel of a six-gun and had listened with empurpled countenance to well defined charges of brand-blotting and debt-dodging. When the trouble between them began, Rangy did not know; and though he recognized that Merrill was notorious in evading his legal debts and used the mailed fist to entrench his stand, it was with a touch of impatience now, rather than sympathy, that he walked towards Ring'em Foster.

For even the presence of Foster might complicate a smoothing situation and keep him from that appointment with Miss Dick.

"Hello, Rangy. Barred from drinks?" Foster greeted. "Have one on us."

Foster smiled his friendship, as did those four other leather-featured men; but instantly it became obvious that their drinks were of the non-intoxicating brand. To Rangy Pete that fact alone was something of an augury.

"Ain't you a whole lot of distance from the old home town?" Rangy bantered easily, to hide his

frown. "You five little boys shouldn't be wandering about all alone. Ain't you afraid somebody'll rope you and put a new brand on?"

Ring'em Foster grinned in a confident way.

"Been down to the Hash Knife tonight?" he asked quietly.

Rangy stared for a moment.

"Jumping Mavericks!" he exclaimed. "And I thought they were the Double K boys. What's eating you, Ring'em? Why this warpath stuff?"

"I've got a date on with Dan Merrill," Foster continued to grin. "No, not the kind you mean. I'm thinking the trouble is over. But I'm having a little session with Dan, and I'd like you as witness, Rangy."

Rangy calculated swiftly.

"How long?" he demanded.

"Ten or fifteen minutes at the most," Foster assured.

Rangy nodded his agreement. The time, he decided, must be passed in some way; so what better augury than to spend it as the witness of peace.

"All right, Juke," Foster spoke quickly, "slip the word to Burke. This way, Rangy."

As he followed towards a private room at the rear, Rangy tried to convince himself that it was the right thing for the Triangle O to be in Triple Butte in force. The Triangle O! He rather thrilled at the thought of that. The Triangle O boys, noted

for attending strictly to their own business; famed on the ranges because they were slow to start anything; but who never yet had started anything they were not prepared to finish.

While he followed Ring'em Foster, Rangy wondered if the man's calmness were but a cloak to conceal the fact that he really had started something with Dan Merrill. And was Foster dragging in him, Rangy Pete? Already his relations with Merrill were sufficiently strained. Not that it would matter under ordinary conditions; but the present, with its entanglements of Miss Dick, was far from the ordinary.

Once inside the scantily furnished room, Foster took up his position by the wall, calmly and watchfully, it seemed.

He had no word of explanation to make and shortly the door opened. Merrill, arrogant and flushed, stepped through and closed it behind him.

The man's eyes, reddened from his stiff potations, swept from one to the other; than a snarl leaped to his lips.

"Takes the two of you, does it?" he sneered. "Well, damn you, Foster, you haven't got me yet!"

Foster did not make the slightest movement; but Merrill, with a quick, downward jerk of the arm, swung his six-gun from its holster.

The gun was on its upward arc when Rangy Pete reached out and gripped Merrill's wrist in a para-

lyzing hold, so that for a moment the huge Merrill stood there moveless, glaring savagely about him, with arm half raised.

"You got me wrong." Foster's lips parted in a cold smile. "If it had been anything like that, Merrill, don't think I would have troubled to get you away from that gang of cut-throats you call punchers."

Relief swept into Merrill's astonished features. The confusion of drink seemed to leave him and he summoned to his countenance the semblance of a smile. Back of it was the tracery of wile, but for the moment the dominating declaration upon his face was one of relief.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded, without any falling off of arrogance. "You can't blame me for wanting to look at you with a gun, since that's the last way you were looking at me the time I saw you down at Holport."

Foster's brows narrowed slightly at the other's tones, and his voice was firm when he replied:

"It seemed to me you would know all about it, Merrill, since I got a message a few days ago to meet you here tonight."

"A message to meet me?" Merrill exclaimed. "I ain't been sending out any messages to you."

"So I imagined," Foster agreed. "But here is the message just the same."

As he spoke, Ring'em Foster tossed an abbre-

viated sheet of paper upon the table between them and motioned for Merrill to take it up.

But Merrill stood there scowling.

"Want to get the drop on me?" he sneered. "No, you don't pull anything like that."

Foster laughed mirthlessly.

"Don't be a fool, Merrill," he returned, with weakening patience. "If I had wanted the drop on you, I could have had it a dozen times tonight. Well, if I have to read it, here it is — 'Meet Dan Merrill in Triple Butte three nights from this. He will have ten thousand dollars towards paying off that money he owes you.' It is signed merely — 'A well wisher, in gratitude'."

Raucous oaths swept to Merrill's lips, so that for a time his passion seemed volcanic. He thrust his derringer in its holster as though battling with the temptation to use it; then, when he had somewhat calmed, he snatched at the paper and glared at it savagely.

Dan Merrill seemed to read it through, then he glared again, first at Ring'em Foster, then at Rangy Pete. His lips opened and closed sharply, as though he were gasping for breath or words.

In time Merrill crushed the paper in his hand; then he leaned across the table and whispered savagely:

"Was that message sent to you, Foster?" he asked harshly.

"It was," Foster informed; and Rangy Pete, looking from one man to the other in swift astonishment, felt that there was surprise even in Foster's manner. "It was delivered one night at the Triangle O by a strange rider. My boys thought he must have been one of your new punchers. Anyway, the message was really delivered to me three nights ago and I believed it. Here I am, Merrill, waiting for that ten thousand on account."

Again Merrill's eyes swept about the room in a puzzled manner which was partly suspicious anger.

"See that writing!" he spoke in quick, jerky words. "It's a woman's. A woman wrote that! A woman knew it was going to happen."

Merrill's words trailed away into silence, and shortly the man began to pace up and down the room like a caged animal, as though for the time he had forgotten the presence of the others.

Rangy Pete looked on in wonder, and even Foster, he could see, was vastly puzzled by Merrill's attitude.

"It's the money I came for, not dramatics," Foster broke in sharply; and at sound of the voice Merrill paused in his tramping and stood there glaring.

Yet that glare, so far as Rangy was able to analyze it, had but little to do with Ring'em Foster. It concerned something quite apart from Foster and seemed to be fixed rather upon the wall above Foster's head than upon the man himself.

"A woman knew it was going to happen!" Merrill burst out violently. "A woman! Do you hear that, Foster?"

There was wonder in Foster's voice when he asked:

"What are you talking about, Merrill? A woman knew what was going to happen? What do you mean?"

Merrill's swarthy features twisted suddenly and the lips broke out into an ill-omened grimace. It appeared in that instant as though he had been snatched back into a saner consciousness, as though his feverish brain abruptly grasped something which had been eluding him; for he laughed, and though it was but a hollow echo, Rangy knew instinctively that his mood had entirely changed.

"Nothing at all, Foster," he replied more calmly. "I haven't that money and that's all there is to it. You've been faked and you've had your trip for nothing. There's a joker around here somewhere."

For a moment Foster's features darkened; then with an effort he spoke quietly.

"When are you going to have it, Merrill?" he asked. "You have been owing me that money and a whole lot more for several years now, and it is a strange thing to me where your money goes to. Here I stock your ranch for you in the first place, Merrill, when you come in a stranger. And because I had a little heart and eased up on you for a few

years, you seem to think you can keep on dodging debts forever. You've sold more steers the last three years than I have, and what's happened to your money, Merrill?"

The latter's features attempted a placating smile.

"I've told you before, Ring'em, that every time I ship a carload of cattle East the banks seize them. They've got me tied up so tight that I'm nothing but a slave to them. They got me when I bought the ranch; you know that; and they had me before. I've told you all this before, Ring'em." Merrill's voice had now assumed the slightest suggestion of a whine. "I told it to you that day down in Holport before you lost your head and went a pulling a gun on me. How many times have I got to tell you, Foster?"

"Then what's all this about ten thousand dollars?" Foster demanded.

It was with a palpable effort that Merrill continued his effort to smile. To Rangy Pete it seemed that some particularly exquisite torture were being applied to the man, but though he studied the situation swiftly he was totally unable to find the answer.

"I don't know anything about it," Merrill forced a reply. "You've been bunked, Ring'em, and that's all there's to it. You know I ain't ever had any money in the banks around this part of the country, 'cause I couldn't get any to put in. You know that,

because you've asked every bank there is. You know I never get more than a few hundred dollars at a time, just enough to keep my punchers stringing along — ”

Foster waved his hand impatiently.

“All right, Merrill, enough,” he ordered, “but I know you are hiding something. And take it from me, Merrill, I am out from this minute to find out what it is. Now listen, for I've got a few things to say to you. You came from the East. We never knew you around this country and perhaps we don't yet. We're easy around here with the stranger. We make the road smooth for him; but take it from me, there's a limit to patience, and if you've been holding out on me, you'll need a bigger flock of hardware than you're carrying tonight, and a bigger gang of rough-necks than you have at the Snaky Y to see you through it. Now, get out.”

There was the cold flame of purpose in Ring'em Foster's eyes as Dan Merrill swung noisily through the doorway; but there was uncertainty as well.

“Do you think he's holding out, Rangy?” Foster asked crisply. “How does he stand around here?”

Rangy shrugged his shoulders casually.

“Owes everybody in sight. The same sad tale is told wherever Dan Merrill hits the trail. It's been a kind of a mystery around here how Dan could sell so many steers and steal a few of the Double K calves, and yet never have any money. But that

ain't got anything to do with me, Ring'em. I'm due out of here this minute."

"So am I," Foster agreed.

The fifteen minutes which Foster had asked were rather more than up, so that Rangy found himself hurrying out in the direction of Tony Burke's front saloon. There was still plenty of time to fulfil the mission of Miss Dick within the hour limit; but discretion demanded that he be seen once more by the roisterers. Just a minute or two in the outer room would do it; then he would slip away into the uncertainty of the night.

Rangy began to work his way slowly and carelessly through the crowd, avoiding entanglements and complications; and he was half way to the door when the abrupt sound of a voice halted him.

"And if there ain't old horn-toad Pete!" The roaring voice was compelling the attention of the whole room, but not the least astonishing feature of it was that its owner was perched calmly upon the bar with Sheriff Stipples and two or three of the Snaky Y punchers about him.

It was Jumbo Irish. Jumbo Irish of the Double K, alone amid the throng of Snaky Y punchers who, at an instant's notice, might swing into vengeful enemies!

Rangy Pete heaved a sigh of weariness.

More time must be snatched from those precious minutes which remained to him for the carrying out

of Miss Dick's mission. For he could not leave Jumbo Irish, or even the most humble member of the Double K for that matter, in such a precarious position as Jumbo now occupied. Temporarily, he could see, Jumbo was enthroned, in compliance with some strange whim of the Snaky Y; but the future, he knew, when tangled with red-eye and reckless punchers, can be more fickle than the winds of springtime.

No, there was no alternative. He must get Jumbo Irish beyond danger.

Out of the comparative silence Bill Sonnes' voice roared.

"Rangy, this shore is one busy night for the referee. You got another job on your hands. You just squint your eyes at Jumbo and tell us, is he gone loco, or isn't he?"

Inwardly, Rangy Pete was writhing. The situation, he could foresee, was apt to consume much valuable time.

"Who ever said he was anything but loco?" Rangy asked gravely.

"I'm submitting, gents," Jumbo grinned in reply, "that Rangy ain't qualified to judge. For he owes me fifty yellow boys."

A roar of interest greeted this announcement and Jumbo seemed in no way loath to explain.

"It's all gotta do, gents, with that Dervisher I brought in. Yesterday afternoon Rangy and me

meets up on the Double K trail while youse gents are chasing bandits. We each finds a place on the trail north of Little Forks where a Dervisher has sloped it away from the main herd. So, being sporting gents, we each takes a trail and we bet fifty yellow boys on who's gonna bring in a Dervisher first. I got my boy bedded down in the calaboose, and if Rangy ain't toting his around somewhere, then I win."

Rangy could see the yawning of treacherous ground before him. Too close probing of the incidents of the past hours would not do at all. A refusal to discuss them would be no better. Besides, there was always the possibility that Buzzard Flynn had talked.

"I'm hearing what you say about having a short-horn rounded up, Jumbo," he replied, as he tried to read swiftly through the darkening future, "but what has that got to do with what Bill Sonnes has been asking me?"

Sonnes interrupted with drunken laughter.

"He's been springing a queer story on us, Rangy," Sonnes informed. "He told Stipples that he caught one bandit at night, and when he woke up in the morning, said bandit's gone, but there's another sleeping all nice and cosy where he left the first. So I'm asking you, curious like, to sav if Jumbo is loco or if he ain't."

Rangy assumed a puzzled air and he edged over towards Sonnes.

"You don't mean that Jumbo's been saying anything like that?" he asked in a loud whisper.

"He shore has, because that's what happened." Irish took up his own defence.

Dan Merrill stepped through the crowd with a loud guffaw.

"How have you been mixing them, Jumbo?" he demanded. "I wouldn't object nohow to getting ideas like that. It must be right restful at times."

A ripple of uneasy laughter crept slowly over the audience.

"Better come with me, Jumbo," Rangy soothed. "We'll go down to the Hash Knife and have a nice quiet little drink. I know it's been awful hot these two-three days, and they ain't no saying what heat'll do to a fellow."

Rangy moved towards the door, but Irish seemed to find something to resent in the tones as well as in the words.

"You don't believe me?" he roared. "I'm a telling you —"

With a nod at Sonnes, Rangy Pete again made use of his bass whisper.

"We gotta humor him," he whispered; then in a louder tone he addressed Irish. "That's all right, Jumbo. They ain't any gent in the room who don't believe you. We all know that road agents have got funny habits. They do things like that all the time —"

"Humor me, will you?" Irish bellowed, in still louder tones.

"Shore, road agents do funny things," Rangy went on, unheeding the noisy interruption. "I heard of one once what certain gents were gonna string up because they differed with him about some yellow boys what had wandered away. They had the rope on him, all ready to string him up nice and neat, when what does he go and do but turn into a two-year old maverick right in their hands. So they didn't string him up at all. They just threw a brand on him, a new kind of brand what they made right there, and they turned him loose again. Nobody ain't ever seen anything of that brand since, so that goes to show he must of turned back into a bandit when they let him loose. I wouldn't be nowhow surprised, Jumbo, if you'd throwed yore rope over the same fellow. Did youse look on his shoulder for the brand, Sheriff?"

The situation was unprecedented, even in Tony Burke's saloon, where strange tales were known to pass from lip to lip. The result was still more uneasy shuffling on the part of the maudlin drunk, while the relatively sober looked anxiously from Rangy Pete to Jumbo Irish and back again.

"I didn't go lookin' fer no sech fool thing as that," Stipples returned.

"Then I'm movin' right here that said party of liquidated gents adjourns to the calaboose an' sorta

inspects the bandit fer a brand what should be summers around the left shoulder. If they ain't no brand, then I moves we hears the rest of Jumbo's story."

Such an expedition, Rangy fancied, might have its attractions for the semi-intoxicated, and if it materialized it should leave an opening for him to separate himself quietly from the rest of the party. In that event he could go about his own appointed duties. Even at that, he appreciated, the end might be uncertain, for now the hour which he had allowed himself was more than up.

Rangy's suggestion did appeal to the gathering, only not entirely as he had anticipated.

"We sure gotta look for that brand," Buck Menzie decreed, "but it ain't proper that no band of gents should be traipsin' down to the calaboose to wait on no Dervisher. I moves an amendment 'at Sheriff Stipples brings the Dervisher here —"

A roar of approval drowned out Menzie's last words. Any act which would break up the bout was to be condemned; anything which would prolong it was to be condoned.

"Seein' 'at the vote carries 'thout bein' put, I moves that two other gents goes with Stipples, an' they's gotta be sober gents, 'cause we can't let no Dervisher get away."

Jumbo Irish mounted to a chair and temporarily took command of the situation.

" 'Tain't no use goin' to the calaboose," he protested, in a far-reaching voice. "You won't find no brand like that plumb idiot Rangy Pete's been talkin' about. This person weren't never no two-year-old maverick 'cause when I first threw a rope on him he was a woman."

Any previous wave of sound which had swept over Tony Burke's saloon was mild compared with the volume which greeted Jumbo's announcement.

"How come you to be makin' such a statement as that, Jumbo Irish?" Sheriff Stipples asked aggrievedly, as soon as the other noises would permit it. "This here's a serious court of the law. It ain't no jokin' matter, an' they ain't no gent gonna walk into my court an' go to tellin' stories what's contempt of court. Jumbo Irish, you laid yoreself open to be fined right severe."

"How you know it's a woman?" Dan Merrill demanded. "If Jumbo Irish has been a ropin' a woman, he's gotta tell about it. He ain't the only one what's got a rope er what knows how to use it."

A restlessness crept over Rangy Pete. The situation was developing in an entirely obstinate way. There was something in Merrill's voice which implied a thirst for delayed violence, while the uncertain attitude of the gathering was not encouraging.

Jumbo Irish was alone, unbacked by the boys of the Double K, but if he felt the weakness of his position, he did not show it.

"Shore, I'll tell you all about it," he answered Merrill. "I'se followin' the trail like I said, an' after dark I comes to a place in the draw where sumbody's struck camp. Knowin' it'd be a Dervisher, I slips up, ropes 'em, an' when the person speaks to me I know it's a woman. I didn't see her face, 'cause she's wearin' a mask, but I seen some long hair what'd tumbled down. She would'n say she wa'n't a Dervisher, an' she would'n promise not to run away, so I hog-ties her fer the night an' puts her in a nice warm place with my blanket. I'm a talkin' to the coyotes a hundred yards down the draw all night, an' when I goes back to the woman in the mornin' I finds she's a man, that person what's down in the calaboose now."

Buck Menzie greeted the explanation with laughter.

"You shore is loco, Jumbo," he decreed. "We don't even have to ask Rangy Pete about that, 'cause we all seen the Dervishers yesterday afternoon an' they weren't no women riders with them."

From between cups Ike Collander found occasion to contribute wisdom which, under other conditions, he might have kept to himself.

"'Course you did'n see no woman rider, Buck Menzie, 'cause youse so busy lookin' up in the air to see how high yore fingers was a reachin'," Ike wagged a finger in Menzie's face. "But if you'd a been where I was, you'd a seen a woman. She's the

purtiest li'l blue-eyed thing you ever laid eyes to. An' she's got hair what looks like it'd been ripenin' in the sun. She winked at me onct, she did, an' if Rangy Pete had'n a been there I know she'd a jumped offen her cayuse an' been a chattin' with me. She's the person what got yore 'vaporated apples, Dan."

Collander's statement appeared to sober the revelers somewhat. It was either that, or they were trying to use their muddled brains to get a grip upon the situation.

"It begins to look as though yer 'skused, Jumbo," Rangy hastened to put in. "You ain't altogether loco, but they's sumthin' queer been a goin' on."

Sheriff Stipples' face, which had gone temporarily blank, again assumed an expression of intelligence and he swung about and pointed a lean finger at Rangy Pete.

"Yer the one what can tell us," he declared. "Tony Burke told me you stood right across the street with Ike Collander when the Dervishers hit town. Now did you see any woman rider?"

All eyes centered upon Rangy Pete.

"Naw, I didn't see a woman rider," Rangy returned deliberately, "but there was just a kid of a boy rider holding down a cayuse in front of Ike and me. I figured once that I'd perforate him, but he looked so young and tender that I got soft-

hearted. That must be the person Ike's been dreaming about in his lick; and that's the same person that Jumbo's been roping and thinking was a woman."

Jumbo Irish, it became apparent, was much relieved. The gathering likewise seemed to feel the release of tension. The only persistently uncharitable ones were Merrill and Sonnes, and the former, it was obvious to Rangy Pete, was looking about for some salve for his previous woes. He had now reached that stage in his cups where he could look for trouble more courageously, particularly as Jumbo Irish, having strayed alone from the ranks of the Double K, appeared like an easy victim.

Rangy's eyes grew sharp and watchful, though his lips held their bantering grin. Jumbo, it was apparent, would shortly need a friend, and he must not be allowed to face alone the vagrant whim of the Snaky Y. As though to emphasize that observation, Sonnes spoke sharply, with the querulousness of semi-intoxication.

"We otta string him up anyway," Sonnes protested, "since he's been roping a woman. Don't matter if 'twas a boy. He says it's a woman, and I'm guessing he otta know."

In the strained seconds of silence which followed Sonnes' remark, the atmosphere changed from peace to anger.

Jumbo's fingers twitched, but he held them

under control. For he found that he was looking not only into the faces of Sonnes and Merrill, but that back of them were a half dozen of the Snaky Y.

Jumbo Irish counted swiftly the toll he might take before he himself went out; then his eyes darted past them to the face of Rangy Pete.

There was something in Rangy's firm features which told him that should a crisis come they two would stand or fall together; yet now Rangy was shaking his head sharply.

Irish could see, as well, that Rangy's face became a picture of worried concern even as he watched.

For Rangy Pete's glance, traveling past Jumbo Irish through the open window, had caught a glimpse of a horse and rider disappearing into the darkened area leading to the rear of the Collander store. And there could be no possible mistake as to identity.

It was Miss Dick.

Her hour was up. She considered herself once more free to act according to the sway of her own strange whims. Rangy shuddered slightly as he thought of the possible end to be reached by the girl's queer promptings. She did need a guiding hand when sailing her course among these reefs of Triple Butte.

Yet here in front of him was the tableau of Jumbo Irish still standing with twitching fingers, and with the Snaky Y crew only too eager for him to make that one swift, battling move of hostility.

One angry shot fired in that scene of semi-intoxication would doubtless mean general carnage. In a flash, Rangy wondered if battle and carnage would not help Miss Dick and her purpose. Still, carnage is impartial. And in this moment of crisis he knew that he must find Miss Dick again, if to see no more than the cold flashes which shone at times from her eyes.

"I wouldn't go taking Bill up wrong," Rangy spoke in a placating tone. "We're just a herd of liquidated gents together a trying to paint the town. I move one more round; then we adjourn."

Jumbo Irish, recognizing the futility of attempting battle with the whole of the Snaky Y, was quite ready to charge up the account against Bill Sonnes until conditions should be more favorable. The bulk of the others were relieved at the prospect of seeing daylight again. Dan Merrill alone seemed keen to press the issue. Merrill by this time had become peevish and quarrelsome, which was a perfectly safe condition to be in, in view of the backing which crowded about him.

"This person Irish has been tryin' to make fun of the hull lot of us," he pronounced. "He's been tellin' a story what we can see if they's any truth in. If it ain't true, then we make him eat it."

"How you gonna test it?" Stipples demanded. "We ain't got nothin' but his word fer it."

"We shore has," Merrill declared. "We got the

prisoner. He knows what's been a goin' on, even if Irish don't. Stipples, you mosey right along to the calaboose an' bring him up here. Here you, French and Dexter, you go along, 'cause we don't want that prisoner turnin' into no buckin' bronco when the Sheriff's a tryin' to bring him up here."

Stipples, accompanied by the two Snaky Y punchers, left the saloon without question. Merrill's word was something to be respected, particularly when the querulous mood was upon him.

Rangy Pete saw the future growing more treacherous still. For Buzzard Flynn, beyond doubt, would be quite eager to tell his full story. That would make him, Rangy Pete, accountable for the present whereabouts of the woman bandit.

And at this particular moment Miss Dick was somewhere at the back of the Collander store, doubtless trying to pick her way in, to get that case of evaporated apples. Rangy found that the circumstances were nagging. If he could only understand this keen desire for evaporated apples he would be willing to accept the situation more cheerfully.

Rangy stepped carelessly to the saloon's auxiliary doorway, just beyond the end of the bar. He stood there for a moment fanning himself with his sombrero, then he stepped just as carelessly out into the night. It was dark there, yet Rangy paused after he had traveled a half dozen paces. He waited

for a full minute, and when there was no indication from within the saloon that he had been missed, he circled quickly to the back of the building, passed behind two other sets of buildings and finally came out upon the main roadway in the quiet section above the saloon. Here he crossed the street, slipped between two shacks and immediately made his way to the rear of the Collander store.

As he had fully expected, Rangy found a cayuse standing not far from where he had left his own. It was well within the shadow of the corral, so he lit a match and looked the animal over.

"Shore is the same bit of hoss-hide what Miss Dick was a ridin' this afternoon," he informed himself. "Next thing is to find out where she's sloped it to herself. An' if she ain't hidin', that match otta tell her it's me."

Rangy waited until his eyes became once more accustomed to the darkness. He looked carefully about in all directions. He listened. There was neither sound nor sight of Miss Dick.

Already in the street beyond he could hear the sound of the Sheriff's party returning with Buzzard Flynn.

Rangy stepped to the rear doorway of the Collander storeroom and listened again. So far as he could judge, there was no human being within reach of his voice, yet Rangy Pete raised his voice and spoke to the night —

"I don't know, young person, where yer hanging out, but I want to tell you this don't look like no healthful night in Triple Butte. I've got a duty to perform, so if you'll jest slope it back to the place where I left you, I'll be there sumtime afore mornin' with what yer looking fer."

Rangy paused. No answer but the silence of the night and the approaching noise of the Sheriff's party.

A hurried tour about the Collander premises and the corral told him nothing. A still more hurried flight to the Hash Knife saloon was likewise unproductive. When that was over Rangy felt that he had no option but to return to Burke's.

At the Hash Knife there were no Double K boys in sight, but the Triangle O punchers were very much in evidence. Rangy counted sixteen of them, who, with the five up at Burke's, made a presentable little army. To Rangy Pete it seemed that there was an atmosphere of waiting about the men from the Triangle O, for though they had every outward appearance of carousing, he did not have to look long to know that every man was absolutely sober.

Rangy returned to Burke's with a feeling that the future was a most uncertain thing. There was a warning of something in the atmosphere as he once more stepped through the side door at the end of the bar and sauntered over in the direction of Jumbo Irish.

Sheriff Stipples, he could see, had returned with Buzzard Flynn in manacles, and as the attention of the crowd was turned entirely to Flynn, Rangy found an opportunity to speak to Irish.

"Hold yore head, ole timer," he spoke to Jumbo in a whisper. "Don't let nothing I say throw you off yore feed, and remember we gotta see the game through together."

"Where's Foster come into it?" Irish asked hurriedly.

"Watch him an' see. I dunno no more about it than you do."

The crowd separated from Buzzard Flynn and attention was once more directed to Jumbo Irish.

Flynn was given a stiff glass of red-eye, after which he was elevated upon a chair and was asked to look the audience over for the man who captured him. His eyes met those of Jumbo Irish, then they traveled on.

"So they's sumbody been a playin' with you, 'sides Jumbo," Dan Merrill interpreted Flynn's actions. "This shore is gettin' interestin'."

Flynn did not trouble to answer. His glance continued to wander. Rangy Pete met that glance carelessly. For he felt that though he might have been foolish enough to tell Flynn his name, the other had at least not seen his face. The nearest Flynn had come to seeing his countenance was under the cottonwood, by the dull light of the fire,

and at that point, he knew, Flynn would not be making a very careful study of features.

Flynn's glance roved on about the full group of men, then back to Jumbo Irish.

"That's the person what roped me an' brought me in," he said, as he pointed to Irish.

"Then whyn't you tell us in the first place?" Merrill demanded peevishly, "'stead of goin' lookin' all about the room. What you mean by that?"

"I was just counting my friends," Flynn returned, seemingly quite unperturbed. "And I just want to say to them here, in plain hearing, that they must'n hold any spite against Jumbo Irish, 'cause he used me like a white man should."

Merrill, Sonnes and Stipples looked over their shoulders hurriedly, and they shot swift glances about the room in all directions.

"Who's yore friends in this room?" Merrill demanded, with a slight falling off of arrogance. "You jest point 'em out, Mr. Bandit, an' they won't be nobody's friends fer long."

Flynn laughed with a confidence which astonished Rangy, in view of his lack of fortitude a few hours ago.

"Out of consideration for you, Dan Merrill, I withhold their names," Flynn replied easily, "and I warn you, if you got any respect fer yore hide, don't try to string me up."

Merrill blustered, but through the bluster it was

plain that he was feeling the uncertainty of the situation. Such things had happened before, even in Triple Butte. Again Merrill looked hurriedly about and this time he told himself that there really were a number of strange faces in the room.

"We ain't thinkin' of stringin' you up, you idjiot," Merrill returned. "We got you here to tell us sumthin'. This here person, Jumbo Irish, says that when he first threw a rope over you, you was a woman. Then in the mornin' when he wakened up, you had turned into yoreself."

Rangy, watching closely, could see that Flynn's eyes showed astonishment. Flynn looked swiftly at Jumbo Irish, and it was apparent to all that he shivered slightly. Flynn tried to laugh, but there was nervousness in his manner.

"Gawd, Mister, I'm glad the calaboose is handy," he exclaimed. "Won't sumbody take me back there now? I ain't no ways hankerin' to be let loose no more."

Rangy Pete could see that the situation was having its effect upon the semi-maudlin brains of the gathering. He also found himself a trifle mystified at Flynn's action.

"You mean you wasn't a woman when Jumbo first caught you?" Sheriff Stipples insisted.

"Don't be a fool," Merrill broke in. "What we wanta know is this, Mr. Bandit — did Jumbo Irish catch a woman in the evening, an' did you trade places with her through the night?"

"Did I trade places with a woman?" Flynn laughed harshly. "Do you think I'm a bigger fool than the Sheriff? If I let a woman loose, why would I stay behind myself?"

Dan Merrill removed his sombrero and ran his fingers roughly through his hair.

"Gawd, Stipples, that's right," he exclaimed. "I had'n thought of that, but if anybody had let a woman get away from Irish, he shore would'n a been fool enough to stay himself. He would'n a asked no woman to rope him up. Gawd, Stipples, what's been a goin' on?"

The situation was plainly depressing and sobering to the beliquored minds of Triple Butte. Jumbo Irish, it seemed, was conscious of that fact, for he immediately took advantage of the silence which followed Merrill's remark.

"I don't wanta go contradictin' Mr. Bandit much," he declared, "fer it ain't polite. All I wants to do is ask, was he a wearin' this here bit of blue ribbon what fell offen his hair when I first roped him?"

Jumbo held up for public gaze a small section of knotted ribbon.

Stipples promptly jerked off Flynn's hat and revealed a closely cropped head.

"That shore ain't the head I threw my rope over," Irish went on with confidence, as he noted the mystified air of his audience. "I throws my rope

and it knocks off the person's sombrero. When I comes up they's two braids of flaxen colored hair a hangin' down, an' this here ribbon falls off the place where the braids had been tied together. 'Tain't fer me to make no suggestions, but I seem to be rememberin' what Rangy said a while ago about that other bandit a turnin' into a two-year-old maverick. If they's a brand on this person's shoulder —"

"We'll see if there is," Stipples declared.

The Sheriff was about to carry his words into action when the sharp spat of a revolver shot cut through the other noises with an insistent arrogance. Stipples jerked his hand back from Buzzard Flynn and a quick silence fell upon the gathering.

"Who done that?" Stipples demanded, his face puzzled.

"It come from outside," Merrill declared. "They ain't nobody hurt, is they? You got friends out there, you road agent?"

Flynn smiled in a superior manner as his eyes traveled to the side door at the end of the bar.

Through the silence there could be heard the sounds of scuffling, of stifled voices, and a moment later three people plunged into the room, seemingly with arms interlocked. They passed the end of the bar and reached a clearing which the crowd hastily made for them. There they came to a pause and when the three had disentangled themselves some-

what it was seen that a man, smaller and sligher than the average, was held in the grip of two Snaky Y punchers.

Merrill recovered his poise rapidly.

"What you got there, Fletcher?" he addressed one of the punchers. "You think you got a prize, er why you bringin' it in here?"

"We found it listenin' at the door," Fletcher explained, "so we sneaked up on it from behind. But it's a rip-ringer, boss. It ain't no tame coyote like it looks. It got Berger clean through the shoulder afore we could do anything with it. It shoots about like a streak of lightnin', an' it'd a got me too if Dexter had'n a jumped it from behind."

Dan Merrill drew closer to inspect the captive.

"Anything what can get the drop on Berger ain't keepin' company with no snails," Merrill declared, without any apparent regrets for the wounded cowboy.

Rangy Pete abruptly found his attention divided between the new arrival, Dan Merrill and Ring'em Foster.

Foster, he could see, was staring at the captive with frank astonishment upon his features, then he turned quickly to his four punchers and gave them some whispered message. It was short and quick, for immediately the four men left their places at the bar and almost at once Rangy lost sight of them. At the same instant he could see that Foster was

pushing his way through the crowd towards him.

Even as Foster started across the reeking saloon, Rangy's eyes darted back to Merrill and the captive. The latter was standing between Fletcher and another puncher whom Rangy recognized as Dirk Duffy, one of the younger element. The captive's arms were held tight, the sombrero was pulled low over his face, so that in the dim light Rangy could tell only that he must be young.

Merrill stepped still closer with a loud laugh, and he put one hand beneath the captive's chin and tilted it upward.

As Merrill made that move, Rangy's hand darted swiftly to his hip. For the light shining upon the upturned face showed him the round firm chin, the oval cheeks, the blue eyes which he had followed into the butte lands.

It was Miss Dick, beyond a doubt, though Rangy had never before seen her full face.

Rangy's right hand tightened on the butt of his six-gun. As it tightened there, he felt his wrist caught in the grip of another man's hand.

"Steady, boy. Wait," a voice whispered in his ear; and without looking he knew it to be Ring'em Foster.

Foster again? In a quick flash Rangy wondered. Then he looked up at Jumbo Irish and nodded.

Rough House Merrill laughed into the upturned face of Miss Dick.

Jumbo Irish stepped down from his chair and crossed to the side of Ring'em Foster.

There was something tense in the atmosphere. Even the maudlin drunk could tell that. For the clamor of voices had ceased and practically the only sound in the whole room was the occasional shuffling of a restless foot.

Dan Merrill was still laughing in the girl's face, and Foster's hand was still upon Rangy's wrist.

"You an' Dirk shore has picked a prize, Flet," Merrill ended his laughter, "fer it's a long time since I've seen sech a purty gent as this a ridin' the ranges. What you got to say fer yoreself, Mister, 'at you gotta go listenin' at doorways? An' what you gotta say fer ruinin' one of my pet punchers?"

Miss Dick remained silent, though Rangy fancied that her eyes met those of Ring'em Foster and remained there for a moment of understanding.

Again Merrill chucked the girl's chin.

This time Merrill's eye appeared to detect something unusual, for his hand abruptly swept down and pulled the girl's riding coat wide open at the front.

A small, dark object fell from behind the coat and dropped to the floor. Merrill stooped and picked it up, and when he held it out at arm's length, it required no imagination for any one in the saloon to know that it was a mask.

"A road agent," Sonnes exclaimed. "Let's hustle

him. They's a fine tree jest up the trail a piece—"

Merrill swore fluently. A certain fever of excitement appeared to have gripped him.

He reached out now and tore the sombrero from her head, and as he did so a coil of flaxen hair was loosened and fell about her shoulders.

"Gawd!" Merrill exclaimed, as he turned about to his audience with a puzzled expression upon his features. "A girl!"

A ripple of amazement swept over the gathering, then shortly there was silence again. Miss Dick remained motionless, staring straight before her with angry eyes.

"I guess we ain't a gonna do no lynchin' now," Sonnes laughed foolishly. "But now you got the little she-cat, Dan, what you gonna do with her?"

Stipples, somehow or other, appeared to have been left out of Bill Sonnes' calculations.

"She's goin' to the calaboose," the Sheriff declared. "Ain't we seen the mask? That's enough to tell us she's one of the bandits."

"Calaboose? Hell!" Merrill brushed Stipples aside. "She ain't goin' to no calaboose, Stipples. 'Cause why? 'Cause she's a gonna go with me out to the Snaky Y. Ain't you, you li'l hell-fire pet?"

Miss Dick struggled slightly in her anger, and Ring'em Foster raised his left hand into the air.

Simultaneously there came a fusilage of revolver shots. There was the crashing of glass, and instantly

the room was plunged into all but darkness. One light was left burning, an unimportant one, above Lefty Merker's head, and it showed the tableau of figures standing about the girl in dull relief.

"Now," Foster whispered, "fists. One each. Then out the back way and hold the door."

Rangy Pete and Jumbo Irish needed no second invitation. They both leaped forward at Miss Dick's captors, with Foster at their side.

Merrill, sensing their attack rather than seeing it, half turned his face. He met Rangy's fist and promptly sagged to the floor like a sack of grain.

Bill Sonnes, seeing the shadowy form of Irish upon him, reached for his gun. He got it from its holster, but at that instant Irish's fist crashed into his face. The gun exploded on a line with the feet of the spectators, and there was a scream even as Sonnes collapsed and slipped to the reeking floor.

Foster attacked so swiftly that he felled Duffy and Fletcher with right and left-handed blows, and almost before the gathering knew there had been a battle, the battle was over.

"Quick!" Foster whispered, as he took Miss Dick by the arm and hurried her through the side exit.

As he closed the door behind Rangy and Jumbo Irish, Foster turned and shot out the remaining light above Merker's head.

Outside, in the comparative darkness, a cayuse was standing.

"That's mine," Miss Dick remarked calmly.

"Yer lucky," Foster returned. "Jump in the saddle, Miss, and smooch it. Hit fer the Double K, and we'll come along later and blind yore trail."

Miss Dick mounted as Foster suggested. Though perfectly calm, it was evident that she appreciated the wisdom of his advice.

"And, Miss, if I'se you, I wouldn't go to doing such a foolish thing again," Foster added, even as the girl turned her cayuse to ride away into the night.

"I won't, if certain gents will keep their promise," she called back, as she slipped into the darkness at the rear of the building.

"Now who did she mean that for?" Foster asked.

"For Jumbo, I'm betting," Rangy replied. "For if she ain't the one Jumbo's been talking about all along, I'll be hog-swizzled."

Rangy broke off because of a volume of noise from within the saloon, which seemed to advertise the fact that Dan Merrill was regaining some of his interest in life.

"Now wouldn't that be a pleasant little spot to be spending the next few minutes?" Rangy digressed. "Have you got any scruples, Ring'em, about running away from a pack of coyotes like Merrill's got yapping about him now?"

"No scruples at all about running as far as the Hash Knife. After that we can think it over."

"Shore, it'll be more peaceful like down there for reflection. Dan ain't got any feelings at all for a person who wants to be alone to reflect. He'd most likely wanta blame me because he jerked his head around when I was trying to pat that Duffy boy on the cheek. And he don't sound to be in any fit mood for argument. I got a feeling, Jumbo, that it'd be better for the constitushun if we packed our way down behind the buildings. There's a bunch yapping out in the street now what sounds like they hadn't no judgment at all."

Rangy led the way behind the row of buildings standing between the Burke saloon and the Hash Knife, but there was no apparent haste in his movements.

"How about your boys who shot out the lights, Ring'em?" he asked abruptly. "Are they all right, or should we go back?"

"I told them to clear out for the Hash Knife at once. They will be all right. Nobody shot back, you remember."

They tramped through a few yards of silence.

"Shore, I know now what the girl meant when she talked so queer," Rangy reverted to an earlier topic. "She must be the one what Jumbo roped up there in the draw above the Little Forks, and they've got a date somewhere to talk things over. Jumbo didn't keep the date, so she rode into town to get him. Ouch! Ain't you got no better sense, Jumbo,

than to go poking a fellow in the ribs in the dark? You might hurt yore knuckles on the butt of my gun."

"Supposing she is the one I roped, how's that gonna explain how that Flynn person took her place in the night?" Irish demanded. "If I hadn't been such a fool as to go to sleep."

"I'm thinking, Jumbo, that it shows that you're a perfect gent. You caught the both of them, and you let the girl go, but you'd been better off if you hadn't gone talking about it."

"I didn't capture no two of them," Jumbo protested.

"Between you and me, Jumbo, now didn't you? You just consider that Ring'em ain't here."

"No, I didn't," Jumbo assured angrily. "It happened just like I been telling back there in Burke's. There wasn't no use to lie about it. It's good enough without."

"Jumping mavericks!" Rangy exclaimed. "There shore is something queer going on back in them buttes."

By this time they had come opposite the Hash Knife saloon, which occupied a prominent position on the far side of the highway, and which, they could see, had caught some of the excitement so recently prevailing at Tony Burke's.

Foster was about to lead the way across, when they found that they were being pursued by a faint

clanking noise, coming from the direction of Burke's. Rangy turned and stared into the night.

"It's the Buzzard boy a tryin' to fly in the dark," he pronounced.

"How you know they call him the Buzzard?" Jumbo Irish demanded suspiciously. "He ain't been tellin' that to nobody but me."

Rangy continued to gaze into the darkness in the direction of the approaching noise.

"It shore is the Buzzard," he declared with conviction, "an' I'd a thought you'd know, Jumbo, 'at everybody knows they's only one Flynn person with the Dervishers. An' did you ever hear of a Flynn person yet 'at sumbody did'n call Buzzard?"

Rangy was spared the necessity of further elaboration by the arrival of the recent captive. Buzzard Flynn approached with an air of haste and confidence. The clanking of the manacles stopped as he came to a halt before Foster.

"Will one of you gents be good enough to use this key on these wrist irons?" he addressed Foster. "The Sheriff ain't feelin' noways inclined to do it, so I come to you."

Flynn extended his wrists and grasped in one hand was the key to the cuffs.

"What makes you think we won't turn you back to the officials at once?" Ring'em Foster asked coldly.

Flynn chuckled confidently.

"It ain't five minutes since you put up a scrap

fer one member of the Dervishers, and you shore ain't the kind of gents what'd stand back and let that Snaky Y bunch string up another."

"Who says we are not?" Foster demanded. "That is just what we are going to do with you, Flynn. The quicker all you bandits are strung up, the better it will be for the county. How'd you get that key?"

Buzzard Flynn became much subdued.

"When it got dark I dropped my wrists and they fell on Stipples' head. He did'n get up, so I lays down beside him and picked the key outa his pocket. Then I crawls around behind the bar, and they forgets all about me."

"Well, we can freshen their memories," Foster declared. "I shouldn't be surprised if the Snaky Y bunch could make a pretty fair job right now of a roping-bee."

"If they got their hands on you, they'd stretch you out so long you wouldn't never throw another shadow," Flynn returned, with an obvious strain on his courage; "but you ain't the kind of a gent what'd hand *me* over to the fellers what's lookin' for *you*."

Foster did not answer, though he flipped his fingers impatiently.

"If you'll 'skuse me fer hornin' into the argument, Ring'em, I'll say Buzzard has served a right useful purpose, what I'll be tellin' you about some other time," Rangy put in. "Lemme have the key."

As neither Foster nor Irish raised further objections, Rangy unlocked the manacles and threw them aside.

"Now if one of youse gents 'll slip me a gun, I'll be fightin' on your side."

"What do you mean?" Foster demanded.

"Nothin' atoll, 'cept the Snaky Y bunch is organizing to come down to the Hash Knife and turn youse all into dead ones fer the coyotes to gnaw. I would'n be surprised if some of them got there afore we do."

"Then we won't lose any more time," Foster declared, as he led the way down a lane between two buildings which fronted out upon the Hash Knife saloon. "The Triangle O boys aren't lookin' for trouble, but they never could dodge."

CHAPTER VIII

OPEN friction with the Snaky Y, it became evident, had joined the list of inevitable incidents of the near future.

Rangy felt that their attack upon Merrill, Sonnes and those two disheartened punchers from the Snaky Y could have but the one result. Some day there must be a vigorous and drastic come-back, for Merrill was not the type to brook public humiliation in peace. But whether that retaliation would be face to the front or by devious ways, was a question which he could not hope to answer. Yet war there must be, whether in the open or along the darkened highways; and it would come tonight, or tomorrow, or some day in the future when Dan Merrill chose to press it.

For the move was plainly up to Merrill.

Even with that consciousness, Rangy could foresee, with a definite trace of uneasiness, just how Merrill could turn the tables against them; and, if he retained any measure of judgment, how he could swing the whole forces of the law into his balance.

In this moment, while he strode across the dusty highway to the Hash Knife saloon, it was plain to

Rangy Pete that they had trifled with the workings of the law, and that Merrill, if he were wise, would play upon it to the full.

"Somebody coming now!" Ring'em Foster spoke calmly, as he indicated a lone rider dashing swiftly down the highway from the Burke saloon. "Buzzard Flynn must have had the wrong tip, for this fellow is alone."

At the side of Foster Rangy walked into the Hash Knife and paused just inside the doorway. The lone courier was Dexter of the Snaky Y.

Just outside the door, clustered about, and looking into the future with incurious eyes, were the riders of the Triangle O.

Dexter dashed into their midst with an aplomb and daring not ill-pleasing to one who admired courage and who recognized the danger of playing thus upon the hair-trigger temperaments of the men he faced.

"In the name of Dan Merrill, I demand the surrender of Ring'em Foster, Rangy Pete and Jumbo Irish," he proclaimed in a loud voice, with his eyes fixed firmly upon a lanky puncher who went by the name of Kyne and who was recognized as Foster's right-hand man.

Kyne shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"Never heard of any such gents," he replied with voice as careless as his manner. "You musta got a wrong idea about something, Mr. Dexter."

The rider's sun-tanned features flushed a darker shade, for Kyne's answer, polite as it was, carried its own message of insolence.

"When we come down here with a posse, it'll shore switch your memory around a whole lot," Dexter flamed angrily.

"I'm hearing you been exercising that posse a bit of late." Still there was politeness in Kyne's tones; and Dexter, with even more hostile attitude, began to back his horse away from the vicinity of the Hash Knife.

That act, in itself, was more insolent than had been Kyne's smooth manner, for back of it was the implication that he dare not trust the breadth of his shoulders to the triggers of the Triangle O.

Dexter was still acting out his overt insult when Foster stepped suddenly through the doorway and pressed his way through the punchers to the center of the highway.

"Hello, Dexter," he grinned. "Don't be surprised to see me. And I want you to believe that Kyne is right. He doesn't know me in this affair tonight. Neither does any of the other Triangle O punchers. Me and persons called Rangy Pete and Jumbo Irish are little boys out all alone at night; so you go back and tell an individual by the name of Dan Merrill that there's just the three of us here — "

Foster paused long enough to study Dexter more seriously through a moment of silence.

"And you can tell him too, Dexter, that the same three gents will walk halfway up the road to Tony Burke's joint, and they'll be expecting to meet Merrill and some two other gents coming down the other way with their guns unlimbered. Got it right, Dexter?"

Evidently Dexter believed he understood the challenge, for without a word in reply he swung his mount about and dashed away in the direction of the Snaky Y forces.

Rangy Pete began to overhaul the mechanism of his six-gun. The challenge foreshadowed but the one thing — a sextette battle in the open roadway. Such an incident, while forcing a swifter crisis than he had pictured, would sweep away once for all the menace of Dan Merrill; and while the urge was strong upon him that he must see Miss Dick once more, there was the abrupt conviction that this would be the better way out.

"Ready, Rangy?" Foster's voice was as calm as though he were but superintending the most trivial routine of a day's work. "All right. Kyne, take Harrigan, and one of you slip up each side of the street to see if they are getting any rough work ready. Throw the regular signal if they start anything crooked."

A roar of cheers echoed through the fever of Triple Butte's restless dreams as Foster, Rangy and Irish took to the center of the roadway, spread

out a few yards apart, and began their slow tramp in the direction of the Mansion House.

Curious idlers watched them go, with a thrill of excitement in their veins.

"Remember," Foster cautioned, "Merrill is my man, Rangy can have Sonnes, and Irish, you take the rest."

The three punchers tramped down the highway of Triple Butte, watching closely for the least sign of movement from the vicinity of the Burke saloon. As they drew nearer the quarter mark, it became apparent that there was a cluster of men in front of the Mansion House and that there were others in the shadows of the buildings even closer. There were still others across the roadway, in front of the Collander store and corral, and there was one mounted man, probably Dexter, in the center of the street.

Dexter, it appeared, had lost interest, for his back was towards the advancing three and he appeared to be haranguing a group of punchers farther up the street. Foster, Rangy and Jumbo Irish tramped on.

They reached the quarter mark without rousing any special display of curiosity from the Snaky Y.

They reached one-third of the distance to the Burke saloon, when Dexter suddenly swung about on his cayuse, shook his fist in the direction of Burke's and then spurred rapidly up the trail towards the Snaky Y.

"Shorely he ain't gone to get that Chink cook what doses up the grub at the Snaky Y," Rangy remarked. "Shorely we ain't gonna have to fight the Chink army too, Ring'em. I'm hearin' that Chink ain't afraid of nobody what he can sneak up unto in the dark —"

"Somebody coming," Foster broke into Rangy's cheer. "Looks like Merrill."

Even as Foster spoke, a man walked quickly from the group in front of Burke's and started in their direction.

"You allus did have all the luck," Rangy went on, "fer if it's Merrill, he's alone. An' I shorely would admire to see sumbody a stirrin' up the dust along beside him."

They reached the half-way mark and stopped still in the highway, with the lone figure tramping down upon them, his identity concealed in the murky shadows of the street.

While still a hundred yards distant, his right hand shot into the air with the signal of peace.

"The luck's broke!" Rangy exclaimed disgustedly. "That ain't anybody but old boy Stipples waving the white flag."

"Guess you're right," Foster conceded, in the same tones. "This way, Sheriff, and show a little more life."

Thus admonished and knowing himself recognized, Stipples dropped his upraised arm and hurried in the direction of the three.

As he drew nearer it became apparent that Stipples had a bandage about his head, as evidence of the sincerity of Buzzard Flynn's work.

"You gents is all under arrest," he proclaimed at once, and in a peevish manner.

"My hearing ain't none too good of late, Stipples," Ring'em Foster replied. "Who did you say you're wanting us to arrest for you?"

"I'm saying you're under arrest. You — you!" Stipples declared, as he tapped Foster upon the chest.

"Don't go letting him tap you thattaway, Ring'em," Rangy broke in gravely. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he's got the idea now that he's a sawbones, ' he's trying to see if you've got the con. There ain't any use, Stipples, tapping Ring'em on the chest, for he's sound all the way through, right down to the finger tips. If I was you, Mr. Sheriff, I wouldn't go to talking any more about arresting innocent folks what go out walking at night. It's most apt to make them peevish. Suppose now, Stipples, you revise yore statement to Mr. Foster and say that you're gonna arrest him tomorrow. That'll sound a hull lot less peevish."

Sheriff Stipples eyed the three for a brief space of time; then he allowed his glance to travel on, to the area in front of the Hash Knife where the Triangle O punchers were in massed formation.

"All right, Foster, if yer hangin' around Triple

Butte tomorrow I'll put you under arrest. You can't say I haven't given you fair warnin'," Stipples conceded.

"What's that he's been a sayin', Rangy?" Foster asked. "His words sound all mixed up to me."

"He says," Rangy raised his voice, "'at he's gonna take the night practicin' how to knock on the pearly gate an' golden, an' then tomorrer he's comin' round to see you."

"He ain't told us yet what it's all about," Foster returned.

"I'm gonna arrest sumbody fer lettin' that Buzzard Flynn get away," Stipples shouted through his anger. "He whacked me over the head, an' he's gonna find out —"

Jumbo Irish stepped forward with a display of interest and shook a fist in front of Stipples' face.

"You ain't gonna tell me 'at you've gone an' let that Flynn get away?" he demanded, with much evidence of concern. "You ain't gonna tell me 'at, be you, Mr. Sheriff, me what spent a hull day and night a traipsin' around huntin' fer him —"

"He got away," Stipples admitted.

"An' who let him get away?" Irish demanded. "Ain't they no sheriff nor nothin' in this town? Who's lookin' after him when he got away? They's a lot of things, Stipples, I wanta know."

"You mean to say you fellows didn't help Flynn escape when you made that row over the woman?"

Stipples asked in much milder tone, and apparently quite ready to see the avenue to peace.

The injured innocence on the faces of the three men seemed sufficient answer.

"You been letting him go yoreself?" Irish asked suspiciously. "You trying to get out of that twenty-five dollar reward what's promised to anybody who catches highwaymen?"

Stipples' features began to writhe in an unpleasant way.

"Honest to goodness, no!" he exclaimed. "That man got away during the row — "

"Then you pay me right now," Irish insisted, "because mabbe, after you been playing with Ring'em tomorrow you won't be able to remember anything at all. Rangy, ain't he got to pay me that reward now?"

For a moment Rangy Pete considered.

"Sounds right, Jumbo," he concluded. "They ain't no man should figure on what Stipples is talking about without squaring his debts before he goes. It's your move, Mr. Sheriff."

Quite plainly, Stipples was caught between the conflict of emotions; but in the end discretion seemed to prevail.

"This is a high-handed piece of work," he protested. "Perhaps I'll have to pay. But I don't know which is the worst, you or the road agents."

"Them is crool words," Rangy complained, with

the old slur in his tones, as Stipples drew a package of bills from his pocket, "but I ain't got no hard feelin's agin you fer hard words, Mr. Sheriff. You've made me so meek an' mild with crool words 'at I'm a gonna let you pay Jumbo a li'l matter of fifty yellow boys what I owes him on a bet. You know all about that — "

While he spoke, Rangy Pete quietly lifted the bills from Stipples' fingers and began to count out the required amount.

"Of all the highwaymen I ever met — " Stipples began, but Rangy again interrupted.

"You somehow don't look at things with the right eye tonight. I'm guessin' mabbe it's 'at crack on the head what the Buzzard give you. I'm jest a lettin' you lend me these yellow boys what I'm givin' to Jumbo on the bet, an' you got two right nice witnesses what'll allus say I borrowed an' can't never back out from payin' you. Ain't that right, boys?"

Irish and Foster assured him that it was.

" 'Sides," Rangy continued, "youse forgettin', Mr. Stipples, 'at the long journey what yer a thinkin' about takin' tomorrer ain't the kind what nobody ever wants no yellow boys on. Thinkin' about yore journey has made me kinda full of sentiments, Mr. Sheriff. It's gettin' 'me that soft-hearted I'm a gonna give you back five of Jumbo's yellow boys. That's all right, Jumbo, they come outa the reward,

an' you otta know sumbody's gotta pay Mr. Stipples fer them handcuffs what the Buzzard stole on him. Shore, Jumbo, you mayn't like it now, but tomorrer, when Mr. Stipples has started on his long journey, you'll be kinda wipin' yore eyes an' pattin' yourself all over to think you was so nice to him when he was with us."

"You're a high-handed scoundrel!" Stipples proclaimed, with a concomitance of oaths.

"We shouldn't be wasting time on nice words," Rangy broke in. "What we want to know is this — is little Danny Merrill and Billy Sonnes coming out to play with us?"

"No, 'cause you got them buffaloed Stipples declared angrily; then hastily he revised his viewpoint. "I mean, for the sake of peace, I wouldn't let them come. If it was just a matter between you people, two and two, it wouldn't matter much; but if Merrill and Sonnes had come down here to meet you tonight we would have had the whole of Triple Butte and three gangs of punchers mixed up in a war before the week was out. I couldn't let that go on. You know that, Rangy?"

"'Course you couldn't. We all know that, Stipples, for it might have been most nigh as unhealthy as trying to ride Ring'em outa town tomorrow. If I was Dan Merrill, I wouldn't noways object to hiring you to ride along beside me to point out them unhealthy things."

Stipples flared in reply.

"Don't get the idea that Merrill is backing down," he protested. "He says the first time you two meet up, you're gonna get plugged good and hard. The same goes for Foster and Irish."

"There ain't anything there to get sorrowful about," Rangy assured. "When Dan's flocking about with the herd, he's gonna get us when he's alone; and when he's alone he's gonna get us when he's flocking with the herd."

"What he means is that when Merrill is riding herd, and you are alone, he'll get you then," Foster suggested.

Rangy nodded reflectively.

"Then mabbe we'd better go up to Burke's and get him now," he decided. "What do you say, Ring'em?"

"For Heaven's sake, get out of here," Stipples pleaded. "If you go up there, half the town'll be shot up before morning. Now go away, like good fellows, and slope it out of town."

At this point Rangy Pete developed symptoms of peevishness.

"I ain't going anywhere unless you say I ain't a highwayman," he affirmed with outward obstinacy. "It's cruel words you been using, Mr. Sheriff; and if we got the Snaky Y buffaloed, Ring'em, there ain't no time like the present to go up and finish the job. Suppose you whissel to Kyne and get a half dozen of your best men — "

"For God's sake, don't do that!" Stipples protested. "You know I didn't mean a word of what I said about you. I was sore at Merrill, that's all. You're perfectly welcome to that money you borrowed, and you know it. Now be good fellows and slip outa town during the night. And if they's anything else yer needin' —"

"They shore is," Rangy gave an abrupt display of docility. "Let's go back to the Hash Knife, fellers, fer they ain't no use standin' here while them folks' eyes is gettin' better."

The four immediately turned towards the Hash Knife saloon, and Stipples' relief was so great that he could not completely conceal it in his manner.

"It's right nice of you, Sheriff, to go makin' an offer thattaway," Rangy resumed the conversation. "I'll ride outa town right away, but I can't go 'thout I got some things along. They's my li'l yellor cayuse up behind Ike Collander's corral. That weren't no place atoll fer me to leave cayuse, 'cause I don't s'pose Dan's got more'n three punchers waitin' to bushwhack me when I go after yellow boy. Dan's shootin' eye is closed, but you don't hafta see much to go bushwhackin' a feller —"

"I'll go and get your horse," Stipples hastened to offer.

"That's right nice of you, Sheriff, to go urgин' me to stay thattaway. But a person an' a cayuse can't live nohow on nothin' to eat —"

"I'll make up a parcel of stuff in Collander's and bring it down here to you," Stipples was still willing to speed the departing Pete.

"You won't go tellin' Ike nothin' about it?" Rangy showed signs of anxiety, "fer Ike's got a big job he's been wantin' me to do. He would'n like it nohow if he thought I's goin' away, an' he most mabbe would'n let you have the stuff, an' then I could'n go — "

"I'll slip in the back way and help myself," Stipples assured. "What do you need? If you're takin' a long trip, you better have a lot of stuff."

"Yer so nice, yer gonna have me bustin' out a weepin' on yore shoulder," Rangy replied, "but don't make it so big that it'll be oncomfortable to carry. You might bring a bit of bacon, an' coffee, an' sugar, an' flour, an' you know, the rest of the stuff — an', I was most nigh forgettin' yeller boy. You bring a box of 'vaporated apples fer me to feed cayuse. They's one box what Ike won't nowadays mind losin' atoll. It's got some red paint on it, an' they's some paint run into the apples. They'll do yeller boy fine. It's funny, Sheriff, how yeller cayuse does like 'em 'vaporated apples — and don't you go to forgettin' 'em."

The last of Rangy's instructions was delivered in an elevated voice, due to the fact that Sheriff Stipples was determined to reduce to the minimum the possibility of Rangy Pete arriving at a contrary

decision. At the Hash Knife, Stipples slipped into the darkened area by the corral and was immediately lost to sight.

"There goes one clawin' wildcat," Rangy reflected. "Don't you ever go to gettin' him sore at you, Ring'em — "

The balance of Rangy's advice was drowned out in the welcome which greeted them from the Hash Knife saloon.

After explanations had been made and the Snaky Y had failed to rise in the barometer of the Triangle O's esteem, there was free discussion as to what should be the next step. Ring'em Foster ruled for peace.

"You looking for a job?" Foster turned to Rangy Pete. "It seems we're needin' an extra man down at the Triangle."

The suggestion was greeted with a round of cheers from the Triangle O boys, but Jumbo Irish took up the reply while Rangy was still grinning at the group of punchers.

"Mabbe so," Jumbo declared, "but the Triangle O ain't needin' him noways as much as the Double K. Ole Calvin Bracken sent me out two days ago to bring Rangy in, an' if he herds up anywhere, it's gonna be at the Double K."

"I'm thinkin' Jumbo ain't far out in his reckonin'," Rangy assured. "I would'n be s'prised if me an' Calvin talked things over right peaceable."

"And I wouldn't be surprised if Stipples brought

you enough grub to get you farther than the Double K," Foster laughed. "He seemed keen to enjoy your absence."

"Yeah, funny boy that," Rangy agreed. "I would'n wonder if he had the idea 'at I hadda keep on movin' till I eat up all the grub he brings me."

When Sheriff Stipples appeared a few minutes later, it became evident that Ring'em Foster was right. Judging from the way in which Rangy's saddle-bags were bulging, and from the size of the package strapped across the front of the saddle, Stipples was not taking any chances that Rangy Pete would soon run out of fodder and be forced back to Triple Butte.

Rangy looked the supplies over critically.

"You shore got a kind an' lovin' heart," Rangy pronounced when his inspection was finished. "S'far as I can see, you ain't left me a single reason fer hangin' around, an' that's real friendly like. I guess I'd better be danglin' along."

Rangy Pete mounted, gathered up the reins, and from his elevated position addressed the Sheriff.

"You otta know, Stipples, 'at Ike Collander's a queer kind of a boy. He's got them strange ideas what's gonna make him say 'at these goods has been stole. An' if it should ever get talked about, they's two-three of us can say who done the stealin'. They's some people foolish enough to get peevish when their Sheriff sets out to steal, but I ain't that kind.

I ain't noways particular, an' neither is Jumbo nor Ring'em. All we asks is that people lets us alone. You gonna try to run Ring'em outa town tomorrer, Mr. Stipples?"

"Don't worry him over a small matter," Foster interposed. "Before morning comes there won't be a single Triangle O boy within sight of Triple Butte."

"Thank Heaven for that," Stipples returned devoutly.

"That shore is a right good tip to you, Stipples," Rangy suggested. "If I's you, I'd run right back to Tony Burke's now an' pass the word around that if they's any Triangle O punchers in town tomorrer yer gonna make crow meat out of 'em. You jest chirp as loud as you like. An' if you wanta do the thing right, you'll get a posse all ready tonight, an' you'll be plumb set on bein' the one to lead it in the mornin'."

"I'll do it," Stipples declared, with an attempt to accept the suggestion humorously. Then he turned and made his way back towards the Mansion House.

"He sure will do it," Foster reflected, "and wouldn't it be one nice little joke if the Triangle O boys stayed around to watch the Sheriff throw them out?"

"Don't you go to doin' nothin' like that," Rangy protested, "fer if you do, I gotta stay too, an' I can't stay."

"Now that you have made your position so clear, we will vanish before morning," Foster agreed. "And remember, if you should ever want that job, the Triangle O is always one man short."

"But not so short as the Double K," Rangy threw back, as he urged his cayuse into activity. "An' don't you forget to ride along and blind my trail."

A moment later Rangy Pete was riding briskly down the trail which led away from Triple Butte in the direction of the Double K, and he was quite indifferent to the fact that his departure had roused curiosity in the brains of Jumbo Irish and Ring'em Foster.

He was likewise indifferent to the fact that Dan Merrill, having retreated with Sonnes to an inner room of the Burke establishment, was lashing his brain and that of his companion to find the surest and swiftest punishment for the offenders of the night.

For a time through that scene Sonnes leered savagely under the prodding of Dan Merrill, listening to the scorn of his employer's outburst. Then he sprang to his feet and went to stand over Merrill.

"We got to get them split up," he declared, in tones which matched his leering. "We split 'em up, Rough House, and we pick 'em off one at a time — "

"Yeah!" Merrill sneered, "it's the only way you can pick anything off. How're you going to do it?"

Sonnes' lips parted still more savagely.

"Leave it to me, Rough House," he gloated. "As long as there's an Ike Collander in town, I'm thinking there's screws we can put on to get Rangy back. Then when he walks into the trap — "

"Sure thing," Merrill showed an abrupt interest. "You ain't so bad after all, Bill. But don't go wasting any time. We'll set one of the punchers to bushwhack that Irish person, and I'd sort of like to settle with Foster myself — "

"You mean by skipping out and not paying any of your debts?" Sonnes leered.

Merrill's reply was an attempt at a grin which only succeeded in betraying its viciousness.

CHAPTER IX.

BEYOND all human doubt, the die now had been plainly cast.

It was to be war from this moment with the Snaky Y — if he could dignify his lonely stand by such an impressive term.

Rangy Pete recognized that, as he rode through the mellowness of the night, with its silence and its cleanness all about him. He knew it to be an indisputable fact when he looked across the ranges and saw, far away, peering through the rim of haze lining the eastern horizon, the oval moon stealing out to inspect the vastness of the world.

In an hour or two, the glow of the moon would be like a vast silvery blanket spread over the leagues of plain, a whitened sheen throwing out in relief the shadows of all living things and picking him out for the eyes of his enemies.

War, undoubted war, if he could regard as war this dignified retreat of his before the inevitable attack of the Snaky Y. But somehow or other the uncertainty of his own future seemed an insignificant thing compared with the fact that out here in the chaparral was Miss Dick, who sooner or later must assuredly be rounded up by the angered troops of

Dan Merrill, unless in some way or other he could overcome her strange whims and send her back to those forest retreats beyond the butte lands.

That was the immediate work which lay before him.

Except for that, he might, at this instant, be riding or camping with the Triangle O, secure among their numbers; but that thought was only a flitting thing which came and vanished almost before it was born, and which had no place whatever among the strange visions which he was picturing among the thinning shadows of the moonlight.

That moonlight was such a fascinating thing, and yet so treacherous.

Shortly, he knew, it would reach out and lay the grip of its tiny fingers upon the ranges until it drew before the eye a picture which touched the heart; until it played with its mellowness and its sadness upon the strings of man's emotions and reached down into the dark, still corners which are the unknown pages of life.

Rangy Pete drew his cayuse to a halt and sat quite still, looking at the rising arc of the oval moon. He was a plainsman, every last inch of him which was not a mountaineer; and because of that he had ridden out many a mystic night under just such a glimmering moon as this would shortly be, nights which had spoken to him with their strange and inexplicable sentiments, nights which tugged at the

heart and whispered queer, old, forgotten messages about the sweet of life which must lie somewhere beyond the surface.

There was a loneliness in that vista of world stretching off there before the eye; and as he recognized its message Rangy Pete was wondering. Off there in the chaparral was a girl. Would she, like himself, find that in the mysterious moonlight of the plains there is a spirit which draws human beings closer together?

A shadow riding off there before his eyes, across the open stretch of moon-flecked range!

Already the Snaky Y were on the hunt. Three horsemen now, riding upon some quest of which he and Miss Dick were the backbone!

Presently they plunged across the open space into the shadows, and as Rangy shook the cayuse's reins briskly and rode into the night through another circling of shadows, he wondered just how many like clusters of horsemen there would be scattered about, infesting the trails which Miss Dick must ride before she once more found the secluded safety of those forested hills beyond the Pass.

Slowly he picked his way through the shadows, with his every faculty alert.

Rangy knew well enough the tactics of the plainsmen to know at the same time the danger which lay before him. As he viewed it now, the menace was more immediate than remote.

Two more horsemen flitting out of the shadows of the chaparral, across the open range land, and into the south! He was close enough this time to hear the rattle of their spurs, to see the poise of their heads, and to know from the set of the bodies that they were bound upon some definite mission which might take hours to fulfill.

It was all plain to him now. Stipples, seemingly docile, had been sufficiently dangerous to tell of that recent outfitting upon the highway of Triple Butte; and Merrill's brain, befuddled though it was with liquor, had been quick enough to see that Rangy Pete would be riding alone, unsheltered by the wing of the Triangle O.

So Merrill was throwing swift groups of riders into the south, to block the trails and the openings to the butte lands. Already the search was on — for him — yes, and for Miss Dick as well!

Rangy held the cayuse in the thicker shadows until that pair of riders was lost to sight in the shifting moonlight. Then he laughed softly to himself.

The danger *was* more immediate than remote. Merrill, swift of brain even through the fumes of his liquor, evidently was a one-idea man. He had seemed to think that when Rangy rode into the south he meant to keep on riding that way. He knew nothing whatever about this trysting place with Miss Dick, to the east of Triple Butte, in which direction Rangy was now riding.

Assuredly Dan Merrill was a one-idea man, or he would have blocked the trails to the north as well as those to the south, the trails to the Snaky Y as well as those to the Double K and the Triangle O. Yet Merrill's imagination probably did not conceive of the fugitives having the daring to ride in the direction of his own brief kingdom.

So Rangy Pete, circling far to the east, rode more swiftly and confidently. A third party of riders he sighted, but they were to the south and seemingly far away.

This time he rode forward with a laugh upon his lips. Let them search to the south and the west, while he rode to the north and east. A chance rider might see him now, but beyond that the danger had suddenly switched from the immediate to the remote. Tomorrow it might be different, if any rider proved keen enough to follow his trail; but for tonight there lay before him only the thrill of this new meeting with Miss Dick. And it was a thrill, even in its promise.

He was acutely conscious of that promise as he watched the growing strength of the moonbeams. There was a certain amount of similarity between Miss Dick and the moonlight, a likeness in their elusiveness; there was the same fascination of the unknown. There was the same tinge in the girl's hair that he had sometimes caught in the glitter of the moon upon the sands of the range hills at night;

there was the same whispering lure which forever beckons man into new deeds, whether of daring, or folly, or wisdom.

From that moment, secure in the precipitate actions of the Snaky Y, Rangy rode directly to the chaparral where Miss Dick must be waiting for him, if that last message thrown out by the side of the Burke saloon had been meant for him. Up to this instant the point had barely touched Rangy's brain at all. He had taken it instantly for granted that Miss Dick, while speaking evasively, had been giving to him a definite message that she would wait for him here in the chaparral; yet now, when he thought of the time which had been consumed and of the fluctuating moods of the girl, Rangy felt a fever of anxiety sweeping over him. Suppose she had ridden on; what then? Shortly the anxiety slipped from him; for the future seemed such a clear thing, distinctly limned against the incidents of the past. There would be nothing left for him but to ride upon her trail, to follow her through the days and the nights, even into the forested hills and valleys beyond the butte lands. The thought of that was a pleasing thing. In some strange manner it seemed to draw him even closer to the girl of his imagination. She was an outcast, made such by some strange whim of fate; while he, in the past few hours, had likewise become an outcast, sought by a score or more of punchers, perhaps even by the

citizens of Triple Butte, because he had given his blind service to her cause. So whether or not Miss Dick was awaiting him here in the chaparral, they had been drawn closer together by chance, and it would be quite the fitting thing that he should follow her into the land of the Dervishers.

That thought, pleasing as it was, was still upon him, when he came to the edge of the chaparral and began to peer into the depths of its shadows.

"I see you have the box of evaporated apples," a calm voice greeted him evenly, so naturally that he wondered why he had ever doubted. "I don't know how you ever did it, Mr. Rangy Pete, but I'll say it was good work."

"Nothing at all, Miss; nothing at all," he mumbled hastily.

"And I am going to agree with you that Triple Butte, when it wakes up, isn't a healthy place to be in," the girl went on, as though unconscious of his interruption. "I suppose they have put a price on my head by this time?"

"They couldn't put no price on that, Miss," Rangy bantered.

For a time the girl remained silent, but it was plain that her attitude had become severe.

"Suppose you lift me down that box of apples," she digressed in the end. "After that, the world is wide. You can choose which way you go."

Rangy Pete grinned through the moonlight.

"You're a queer one, ain't you, Miss?" he asked, as he placed both hands firmly upon the box resting upon the saddle-horns. "The world shore is wide. It's too wide for a little person like you, and that's the reason I don't hanker to be riding away without knowing something about you. The world shore is wide, Miss; so wide that if you rode one way and I rode the other and kept on picking our way through the moonlight till morning, there ain't any guarantee that we'd ever meet up again."

"I imagine there must be some meaning to that if I only had the time to figure it out," Miss Dick reflected, "but I have already seen one or two posses riding by."

"I mean I wouldn't object to knowing how to find your front doorbell when there's something special to say to you." Rangy became more courageous.

"Say it now," Miss Dick suggested.

"I ain't thought of it yet," Rangy grinned, "and I won't be able to think of it till after you're gone."

"I see. Strained politeness. You are trying to say that you want to know where you could find me. Why didn't you say it in the first place? Here, take this."

With that, Miss Dick extended to Rangy Pete a whitish something which looked like a folded paper. Rangy took it and found that it was a small envelope, sealed. He was about to open it when Miss Dick held up a restraining hand.

"Now, the evaporated apples," she spoke crisply. "I must be miles away from here before daylight."

The casual manner in which she concluded that their ways were to part at this point left Rangy slightly nonplussed. He remained silent while she went through certain routine and while she mounted briskly.

At length she urged her cayuse a few steps forward, out into the fuller glitter of the moonlight. She swept off her sombrero and she turned her head so that the moon rays fell clean and unbroken upon her bared face. In that moment Rangy could see that the oval of the girl's chin and cheeks reached up to embrace the rest of her features; he could see that the full face was oval and young and wistful, that the eyes were wide and of a shaded blue which he could not read through the uncertain light, and that, unless the softening touch of the moon had painted a false picture before his eyes, she was youthful and her body was filled with the wine of life.

But though the girl was youthful, it was this sudden mood of wistfulness which touched Rangy Pete. He did not stop to ask himself if this mood were real or assumed. He knew only that he felt a sudden desire to do or say something which would bring a smile to her lips; but he found himself surprisingly unequal to the task.

Abruptly she turned to face him.

"Good-bye, Rangy Pete." She spoke softly,

almost with lingering notes in her voice. "Forget that our paths have crossed."

With that she rode across a narrow space of moonlight, then suddenly swept into the shadows of the north.

Rangy Pete stood with bared head before the moonlight. The only sound was the distant, unplaceable murmur of the plains, a whispering echo which spoke of vast solitudes, which told of the weariness and loneliness of life. There was a haunting something in the soundless echoes of the solitudes, in the loneliness of the moon upon the plains, which made Rangy wonder at his own actions. Beyond doubt Miss Dick was a brigand, a member of the Dervishers. Why should he give to her memory a single thought?

Rangy mounted slowly, and he turned the cayuse's face to the south. Then, with barely a conscious effort, as though in response to the magnetic lure of some power which had gripped his senses, he turned the mount's nose again to the north, towards those elusive shadows into which the girl had ridden. For a long time he sat there, peering into the vagueness of shadow land, almost as though he hoped this memory of Miss Dick would materialize into physical form and greet him again with its living voice.

How silent and pulseless the world had become! Only this one vast beating heart of the universe about him now, whispering in his wondering ears its strange mockeries. Only the silence of a night

so poignant as to be like the far-off echo of a living voice, a vast, incomprehensible monument of nature which would live forever with this shimmer of the moon thrown over it, a taunt to the littleness of man and to the pettiness of his devotions! Silence everywhere upon the ranges; patches of moon-flecked chaparral and plains as far as the eye could reach, with the silver veil of night wrapping it all in its own mystery.

The grip of it all was tugging at the man's heart; it was pouring into the submerged chambers of the soul the old message that in the flitting of life one should take the prizes which meet the hand; it was toying with skilful fingers over the strings of emotions; it was whispering that life is a glory only when man makes it so.

Rangy Pete's lips grew firm and his breath caught sharply. The grip of life was upon him, with its passion of possession.

The moon rose higher, to peer down upon those firm-set lips, to stare past the blue veil of his eyes, and to search down in the depths of his being for other strings to play upon; and while its oval fullness swept slowly up the arc of the sky, Rangy Pete was attempting to fight out his own battle.

He sat so long in silence that the burnt-yellow cayuse looked over its shoulder and whinnied softly.

"I'm guessing you're right, yellow boy," Rangy agreed, at length. "We're making plumb idiots of

ourselves, ain't we, cayuse? We mustn't let ourselves get any touch of moon-madness, for our job right now is to sit across this trail and keep any of them wandering coyotes from the Snaky Y from picking it up."

With that decision upon him Rangy dismounted, unsaddled the cayuse, and rolled himself up in a blanket at the edge of the chaparral at a point where he could command a fair view of the moon-swept stretches of plain lying to the south and towards Triple Butte.

It was in the wakeful hours of night that the resolution came to him. He was an outcast, so why not follow his own whims? He would pursue the route taken by Miss Dick in the night; and perhaps off there, in the land of hills and gorges which lay beyond the pass in the buttes, he would find her among her own mountain peaks and forested valleys, and perhaps, when he found her, he would be able to understand some of those things which were now a mystery.

Through the night there were no riders from the Snaky Y, or from Triple Butte, or from any direction whatever; so when the first rays of the sun heralded the day, Rangy began his journey. He would follow Miss Dick, if need be, even to the haunts of the Dervishers.

The track of her cayuse, as it skirted the clusters of chaparral, was not hard to follow, so Rangy found

that he could devote a portion of his time to a precautionary outlook for stray riders who might notify those posses from the Snaky Y. Single riders would not be worrying, even posses of two or three would not be alarming, except for the fact that Miss Dick was somewhere on before.

It was because of this keen outlook for stray punchers that Rangy almost missed the turning point in his life. For it was really the shying of the burnt-yellow cayuse which drew his attention to that strange looking setting by the side of the chaparral. At sight of it, Rangy jerked the astonished cayuse into a stop, and he uttered a curious variety of expletives, none of which seemed to satisfy his imagination.

For a time Rangy sat there, staring down at the scene before him, with his left fingers toying with the tip of his ear.

"Jumping Mavericks!" he exclaimed, at the exhaustion of his expletives. "If them ain't Dan Merrill's 'vaporated apples, you can call me a sheep herder."

Rangy dismounted slowly, as though quite in consternation at the scene before him; and just as slowly and cautiously he examined a box which lay there before the stare of his eyes. It was a paint-smeared box, which had evidently contained evaporated apples, for here, scattered all about, were heaping handfuls of the fragments of apples tossed recklessly

through the grass and the sprinkling of sand.

Dazedly, totally uncomprehending, Rangy began to gather the scattered store of apples for which both he and Miss Dick had risked so much. There was something strange here, something wrong.

Rangy rose to his feet quickly, and began a search of the range and the chaparral in the immediate vicinity, in hope, almost in fear, that he would find something further to round out the hidden points in the story. Yet the story told to his trained eyes was a simple one. There had been but the one horse pass this way and but the one go away again. That meant that his first fears were unfounded. Miss Dick had not been attacked or waylaid. This was her work alone.

With still greater amaze upon him, Rangy returned to the task of scraping up those evidences of Miss Dick's eccentricity. He gathered up the apples and heaped them into the box, and when he smoothed them down he found that the receptacle was filled to the brim. Miss Dick doubtless had not taken so much as a single piece of evaporated apple with her; yet there could be no doubt of the fact that this was the Merrill box. The girl also had been seemingly content, for she had ridden on towards the northern buttes.

Rangy sat down beside that box of discarded treasure and pondered it for long, with the tips of his left fingers constantly playing with his ear.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet, sprang to the cayuse's back and turned it once more in the direction of Triple Butte.

"Ike Collander's the boy who can tell us all about these funny things that have been going on," he informed himself, "and we've just got to find out what it means, yeller boy, Dan Merrill or no Dan Merrill. We'll use our head, but we've got to find out."

A mile from Triple Butte, Rangy guided the cayuse in among the chaparral. There he picketed the animal, and a half hour later he was within a quarter of a mile of the rear of the Collander store.

From the security of a cluster of chaparral he studied the town of Triple Butte, but the only outward reflection of its attitude was a great weariness because of the trials which had so recently come to its doors. At the best, it was not an hour for activity and now there was but little of it in evidence. There were still some head-drooping cayuses in front of the Burke saloon, but there was no sign of humanity anywhere. The town doubtless would be sleeping off its debauch of excitement, so Rangy judged it a most opportune moment for advance.

At the worst, discovery meant battle with what remnant of the Snaky Y forces might have been held back from the combing of those southern trails and ranges; but that was a chance which he would have

to take. For there were other things storming at his brain now which seemed more threatening than the augury of battle.

Rangy moved forward with the utmost caution. Battle, against the odds which Triple Butte could muster, was not to be encouraged.

But Triple Butte's eyes seemed closed in sleep. The first pale rays of the sun slanted down upon the dusty highway and threw long shadows from the gaunt legs of the horses standing in front of the Burke saloon. Rangy walked confidently to the rear of the Collander store, found it locked, and just as confidently let himself in. He crossed the store-room and moved towards the front. Ike, he fancied, would be sound asleep behind the counter; still, he might be able to throw some light upon that mystery of the evaporated apples. And Rangy felt that some light was necessary, if his brains were to continue to perform their natural functions.

Just at the doorway he paused.

It was strange, but there were voices out there in Ike's front store. Voices in Collander's store, of all places, at the very moment when he demanded secrecy and when the balance of Triple Butte seemed to be asleep! Rangy stole closer and he listened with caution.

In the room beyond a dominant voice began to hold sway.

"Holy snakes!" Rangy protested to himself.

"What's come over this town? What's Merrill doing here at this time of day?"

The man's voice seemed to give its own answer.

"Shore, all you gotta do, Ike, is to send word to Rangy that the coast is all clear and for him to come back to town. I'm guessing you won't have any trouble finding out where he is; and when he comes back, you won't have anything to do but sit back and save your hide."

"Why've you got it in for Rangy?" Collander's placating voice answered. "He ain't been doing anything to you. He was full of red-eye last night, same's you was yoreself, and when gents get sober, they forget — "

"What's he done?" Merrill interjected a slightly bellowing voice. "Ain't he been helping that woman bandit to get away? And ain't she the one what stole my evaporated apples from in front of your store? What more do you want?"

"What's a few evaporated apples?" Collander insisted; and Rangy felt a glow of warmth for the small man who was fighting out his battles in his absence. "If that's all that's eating you, Dan, you just slope out to my storeroom and take all the apples you want. There's most a dozen cases of them there — "

Dan Merrill made a noise indicative of disgust.

"What good is yore evaporated apples?" he demanded in a high-pitched voice. "You don't seem

to know what's been goin' on around here, Ike Collander. It weren't them apples what the Der-vishers come to steal; it's what's in the apples."

Rangy Pete experienced the same sensation of astonishment which caused Ike Collander to wait for a moment before replying. Then shortly he heard Ike's eager voice demanding,

"An' what's in them apples, Dan?"

"They ain't nothin' atoll but ten thousand dollars in gold. That's all that's in 'em."

"Gosh A'mighty!" Ike Collander exclaimed, and his voice indicated that he had acquired a new view-point on life. "How comes it they's ten thousand dollars hid away in them apples?"

"You otta know it ain't safe to go shippin' it no ordinary way, with them bandits flockin' about the express offices."

Dan Merrill continued to vent his spleen upon Ike Collander, but Rangy Pete quite lost track of his words.

Merrill's announcement had come to him with a cold shock of amazement. Ten thousand dollars hidden away in a shipment of evaporated apples! What the money was for did not concern Rangy Pete. But he found that he was keenly interested in the fact that it was this particular box of evaporated apples for which Miss Dick had shown such a preference, and for which she had been willing to run such a risk. That knowledge left Rangy Pete hot

with anger, towards himself, towards Miss Dick, and most of all towards Dan Merrill for having shipped money in such a fashion. The latter anger, he shortly realized, was absurd. But it was indicative of the new feelings which had sprouted somewhere within him in the past few days.

Miss Dick a bandit, a real highwayman! Her own actions convicted her of that. For when Rangy Pete revolved the circumstances in his mind in rapid retrospect he could not find any more charitable interpretation to put upon the girl's conduct. She had gone to great lengths to acquire that particular box of apples containing Merrill's ten thousand dollars in gold, and in the end she had made of him, Rangy Pete, a tool to accomplish her end.

Rangy felt the blood surging warmly through his veins. It mounted to his forehead and burned its way through the tan of his cheeks.

Miss Dick a highwayman, an outcast, as she herself had said. And there had been those queer emotions which grew up within him at the first sight of her.

While hurried thoughts surged through his brain, Rang lost track of time. He forgot that there were men in the room beyond. For the time being he forgot all things in the world except that the blue-eyed girl who had looked at him so wistfully was in reality a bandit. She had looked at him wistfully, had played with him, toyed with that thin strain of good within him —

A loud, eager voice in the store beyond drew Rangy back to the present. It was Merrill, shouting:

"Bully boy, Ike. Then they didn't get it after all." After that there were rapid steps.

In that instant Rangy knew that Collander had told Merrill of the exchange of boxes. He knew, as well, that Merrill was coming to the storeroom. His first prompting was to stand and face Merrill. His second prompting induced him to step behind a convenient pyramid of crated goods.

The door was thrown open and Merrill stepped through, followed by Ike Collander and Buck Menzie.

"Where d'you say that box is?" Merrill demanded excitedly. "Don't go gapin' there all day, Collander."

Ike Collander was staring in a worried way at the vacant place where he had last seen the paint-smeared box. Then he brushed his hand across his forehead as though some of the confusion of the night before were still nagging at his brain.

"Rangy and me carried it and put it right atop that pile," he declared. "And I remember it's there last night when I goes over to Tony Burke's. I remember seein' it right atop the pile when we thought the bandits had — but it ain't got wings and flowed away. It's gotta be here summers —"

Without waiting for encouragement, Merrill tumbled the pile of boxes over and searched each one for the identifying paint-smear.

"It ain't got wings," Merrill sneered, "but they's been sumthin' here what has. It's that woman what plugged Berger outside Burke's last night. I've hearn of she hell-cats, but I ain't never saw one afore. She's stole that box, an' Dexter caught her when it's too late. They's a hull bunch of bandits at Burke's last night, fer did'n you see how they shot out the lights?"

The mention of the female bandit brought the blood once more to Rangy Pete's cheeks and forehead. Perhaps she had been too clever for Dan Merrill, but it was also plain that she had been too clever for him as well. The situation, combined with Merrill's querulous voice, left Rangy Pete tingling for action.

At that particular moment Dan Merrill chose to divert his stream of abuse from the absent bandit to the seemingly absent Rangy Pete.

"An' they ain't no sayin' but what that fool of a Rangy Pete is in cahoots with the bandits," Merrill directed his spleen at Buck Menzie. "I been thinkin' he's actin' queer of late, an' you seen what he done last night when them bandits shot the lights out."

"Yeah," Menzie drawled. "I seen and hearn all he done last night. My ears was both workin' right when Dexter come back from the Hash Knife, and they didn't miss a word. My eyes might of been a bit bleary, but I kinda remember seein' Stipples

go down the road to meet them three men — ”

Menzie's taunt was rewarded with a fine stream of invective which reached out and embraced Ike Collander.

“He mighta done that last night 'cause I's drunk,” Merrill broke off from invective to connected words, “an' 'cause he closed my shootin' eye when I's lookin' the other way. But that was last night. This mornin' I'd shore like to get my eyes on that fool of a Rangy Pete. I'd — ”

Dan Merrill's words broke off as abruptly as though his lips had been closed with a blow. His mouth remained slightly open, and he stared directly in front of him with the attitude of a man who sees a most unexpected apparition.

Ike Collander, looking in the same direction, saw that the apparition was Rangy Pete. He saw, as well, that Rangy was standing about a yard from a pyramid of dry-goods boxes, that his pose was negligent, but that both thumbs were hooked into his leather belt just above the hip bones. Immediately below the right thumb was the bulge made by the holster of a six-gun.

In the flash of swift time, Collander noticed that Rangy's eyes were hard and cold and gleaming, with a hardness which he had never seen before; yet when Rangy spoke, Collander was surprised at the mildness in his drawl.

“It ain't noways polite, Dan, to go clippin' off

yore words thattaway when another person horns in," Rangy's voice came clear and smooth and velvety. "I'd shore admire a hull lot to know what yer gonna do when you get yore eyes on me, though it kinda looks to me as though they's one of yore eyes what's had an argyment with sumthin'."

Merrill's face flamed a passionate red.

The situation, he knew, would have been quite bad enough without witnesses. With two men alone, there might have been some opportunity for compromise, or for trickery. But at this particular moment, with the tongue-wagging Buck Menzie looking on and eagerly annotating every word and movement, the future looked different.

Merrill's shifty eyes knew that they were staring into the face of death. The brain behind the eyes knew the falseness of Rangy Pete's velvety voice; it knew the taunt in Rangy's drawl; it knew, as well, that Rangy was trying to goad Merrill into the first hostile move.

Dan Merrill stood still, with the flame of passion upon his features. For Merrill knew that for the first time in his quick-shooting career his cards had been called. As he stood there through the seconds which seemed endless, he thought of the many times when he had held men as Rangy Pete now held him; and he remembered how, in the end, he had goaded them into the one hostile move which let him shoot them down in cold blood. That was Merrill's way.

Hold men by the power of his personality, taunt them until their weaker wills broke before his gibes, and then, when they reached for their guns, to shoot them with the calm surety that the lawless law of the land would be with him.

How many men had he killed in that way? Four — five — or was it six?

A cold perspiration came and stood on the forehead of Dan Merrill, the swift-shooting fire-eater.

An even break? God, how he had always laughed at the words before! An even break? That had not been his way. A little of the edge upon the other fellow. That was it — just that thin margin of edge which Rangy Pete now had upon him.

Something of those quick, flaming thoughts must have shown upon Merrill's face, for Rangy Pete's lips curled into a smile which was nothing more than a taunt.

"You shorely ain't gonna tell me you been a lookin' fer me to give me a punchin' job out to the Snaky Y," Rangy went on. "I ain't sayin' but what li'l Danny needs sumone to go round with him an' keep the big boys from mussin' up his purty clothes, but they ain't no use askin' me to ride herd thattaway. You got the wrong idea, Danny. I ain't no nurse-maid. I'm a puncher."

Merrill clenched his fingers and held them tight with an effort of the will. His face grew a darker red and the flame of his anger shone from his eyes.

If only he could gain one small second of time. If only Fate would step in and give him that one little gift from the great gulf of eternity. Just one second. Just one second ahead of Rangy Pete. That would do it.

In his boasts, Merrill had bragged of the even break which he had always given the other fellow. But in these cold seconds which seemed to be measuring him up for life or for death, Merrill knew that never in his life had he given the other man an even break. He had always asked the sure thing. Oh, God, for one second out of the endless cycle of time — one second — a sure thing —

“Er mabbe Danny’s gonna say he’s sorry fer wantin’ to pick on a pore li’l feller like Rangy Pete,” Rangy went on, with increasing mockery in his voice. “It’s sorta funny, ain’t it, Buck, how Danny’s been a lookin’ an’ a lookin’ fer me, an’ when he finds me he’s that joyous he can’t find a word to say? If I’s Danny, I’d do sumthin’. I would’n go to standin’ there like I’s made of stone.”

Merrill’s fingers clenched more firmly still. Gad, if only he dared make that one swift reach for his six-gun. That, though it meant death, would be a relief. He could understand now how those other men had broken before his will. But *he* would not break —

He would not reach. He had heard of Rangy’s speed on the draw. To test it? Not now. Some

other day, perhaps. Some day in the future when the edge was with and not against him.

The drops of perspiration stood large and prominent upon Merrill's forehead. Then he forced a laugh to his lips. He tried to bring a casual tone to his lips as he spoke.

"What's wrong with you, Rangy Pete, you tarnation idjiot?" he demanded, with an attempt at bantering. "I shore have been lookin' for you — "

"An' now't you found me, what's there so funny to laugh about?"

"You, Rangy, standin' there like you're ready to claw sumbody's eyes out. You ain't got me right, Rangy. I been lookin' fer you 'cause yer the best tracker of trails in two counties, and I got a job for you."

Already Merrill was feeling much freer. His quick wit had come to his rescue at last. It had saved him from the humiliation of backing down before Rangy Pete. It had, he believed, put an entirely different complexion upon affairs in the eyes of Buck Menzie.

"You don't mean to say yer wantin' me to ride herd on you, Dan, to keep the bad men away?"

Merrill compelled himself to twist his lips into the shape of a grin. It was difficult, but there was still that thin edge of advantage with Rangy Pete.

"It amounts to 'bout the same thing," Merrill admitted, with his forced smile still in evidence. "You mayn't know it, but them Dervishers got

away with ten thousand dollars of my money in gold, and we're gonta take a posse and follow them till we get the gold or cut it outa their hides. We want the best tracker in the whole State to lead the way, and you're him."

At this stage, Merrill really began to expand. His brain was such a versatile thing. It had gotten him out of more than one bad corner, and now it was serving him again to fine purpose. Perhaps it would shortly reverse their positions and put Rangy Pete in the corner. In that event, it might not be necessary to lead a posse into the hills.

"Them kind words is most more'n I can stand," Rangy declared, with apparent sincerity. "They touch a soft spot in me what wants to weep. But you otta know, Dan, 'at I got a sort of likin' fer this ole hide of mine. It's queer, but I got a likin' fer myself what I can't get over. If it wa'n't fer that, I most mabbe would'n mind ridin' out in front an' lettin' you come smoochin' along behind."

Rangy Pete waited expectantly. If Merrill refused to accept that insult, then he could be sure that Merrill was determined to preserve life at the cost of all things else.

Merrill's fingers closed again, and his lips twitched. But with a supreme effort he recovered his smile and held it. He even forced a laugh.

"But I mean it, Rangy," he declared. "I shore want you to track the Dervishers for me."

Rangy Pete's manner changed, though his watchfulness did not slacken in the least.

"That's different," he admitted, as the drawl left his voice. "Why didn't you say that in the first place? But what makes you think they got your money? The best I ever heard about your money, Dan, was that you had debts; and it seems to me I remember a session last night over at Tony's."

Again Merrill's face became a picture of confused desires; but in the end caution won over anger.

"It doesn't matter what happened last night," he scowled savagely. "That was my ten thousand and they stole it. They robbed me, and somebody has gotta string for it."

Rangy nodded reflectively, almost absently.

"I see," he concluded. "Trying to slip something over on Ring'em Foster. And won't he be the pleased little boy when he hears about this?" Then Rangy's voice sharpened. "Looks as though you had some kind of a skin game going, Merrill, and I'd start looking for the bottom if I had the time. Now, is there anybody else besides Ring'em who can't get Danny cornered in the same corral with his yellow boys? Ike, how about you? Seems to me that little scowling Danny has been dodging you for some time. Ike Collander, you got a bill against Dan?"

Collander nodded his head in swift appreciation.

"You know I have, Rangy," he declared.

"Then, Ike, you just step outside, and you make

up that bill. Do it pronto, and don't you go to being stingy with yourself. And Ike, before you go, frisk little Danny for any cannon he might be toting around him with evil intent. He's looking restless, and I wouldn't nohow want you to come back and find him perforated with little holes."

Ike Collander, it developed, had no scruples against such a task. He even appeared to put a little personal touch into the operation, so that in the end he produced two derringers which he presented to Rangy Pete.

"Now you mosey," Rangy instructed. "Buck Menzie, is there anything that little Dan is owing you in the way of red-eye or anything else?"

Menzie removed his sombrero, and he used the tip of a finger to agitate the top of his head.

"Don't you be afraid to speak up, Buck," Rangy encouraged. "Little Dan has got a big and generous heart, but it's only intimate friends like me what knows it. I found out long ago, Buck, that Dan's rough and shaggy on the outside, but behind what they call a rough exterior there's a heart a burning with the milk of human kindness."

"I do sort of remember a bill of two-three years standing what Dan never paid," Buck picked up courage. "It weren't much, only twenty-five yellow boys, but I been thinking I could use it."

"You shore can," Rangy replied mildly. "Dan's already reaching for his pocket, and I wouldn't be

noways surprised if he gave you a couple of extra yellow boys for forgetting about it for so long."

Merrill, braggart and bully that he was, still had sufficient intelligence to recognize when the game of life had turned against him. So, with a fair imitation of a smile, he cleared up the long-standing debt with Menzie, and when Collander returned a moment later with a bill running into the hundreds, Merrill paid it without question.

Rangy's attitude was one of astonishment.

"Jumping Mavericks!" he exclaimed mildly. "If it ain't funny where Dan gets all the money. Last night he's sobbing to Ring'em about the crool deeds of poverty; and now you got me feeling so sad and sorrowful, Dan, that I can't nohow resist yore offer to go traipsing after Dervishers. I'm hearing you pay good money for trackers."

"Highest going," Merrill agreed eagerly, for already he could see the opening of the avenue which would lead to revenge upon Rangy Pete. "Name yore own figure, Rangy. Anything in reason, and it's yours."

"Suppose we say a couple of hundred yellow boys for pointing out the person what took yore ten thousand dollars away from this building. Don't that sound reasonable?"

"It does," Merrill admitted hastily. "You point out the person, and if he's within gun distance, you get the two hundred."

Rangy considered for a moment, through which interval it was evident that he revised some intention in his brain, for now he contented himself with a sharp nod and the brief remark:

"All right, gents, I'll be smooching out on the job."

With methodical care, Rangy walked past the three men to the doorway leading to the Collander store. He closed the door, locked it from the inside, tried it carefully, then dropped the key in his pocket. Next he handed one of Merrill's six-guns to Ike Collander, and threw the other through a hole into the unused loft. Finally Rangy walked to the outer door, tested the lock, and stood for a moment in the doorway looking in upon the men.

"What you gonna do, you idjiot?" Collander demanded. "You gonna lock us in?"

But Rangy's eyes were engaged in a shrewd study of Merrill's angered features.

"You'll have to excuse me, Merrill, for overhearing what you was planning to do through Ike Collander," he remarked coldly. "They ain't no use sending any messages to me now saying that the trail is all clear, and they ain't any use holding anything against Ike. For if you do, Merrill!—I heard what Ring'em Foster said to you last night, and I know the kind of holes he's gonna claw into yore hide as soon as he hears how you been double-crossing him. But listen, Merrill! You touch so much as one of Ike's little fingers, and the things

that'll happen to you will make you think Foster was talking about a hugging match. Don't you go to listening wrong, or getting any stray ideas into yore head. I may be mooching on my way, but there won't be many things I won't hear, and if I hear anything about Ike getting mussed up, Merrill, there won't be enough punchers west of the Mississippi to keep me from getting at you; and if I have to get at you *that* way, you debt-dodging hold-out, shooting will be too good. I'll rope you up and cut you to pieces with a pen-knife. Now, Merrill, you gonna touch Ike?"

The man's baleful eyes had become shifty and nervous.

"My God, no!" he exclaimed fervently; then his voice became whining, "You won't tell Foster?"

Rangy considered the other contemptuously.

"I'm thinking I won't," he concluded. "Not yet. But if I have to — !"

Merrill's trapped manner seemed to indicate that, at the best, he was storing up hatred. But for the moment, Rangy overlooked it.

"What do you think, Ike?" he asked. "You want to stay in here, or will you come outside when I lock this coyote in?"

"I'm thinking I'll stay a while to see that it don't gnaw its way out too soon."

"Good enough," Rangy allowed; and even as he spoke there came the sound of steps in the outer

store, followed shortly by the rapping of knuckles upon the inner doorway.

Merrill's gloating eyes sharpened swiftly. Treachery, it became evident, bulked large upon the code of his permissible morals.

"Ike, you step to the door and see who it is," Rangy took charge swiftly. "And, Merrill, not a peep out of you."

But a voice from beyond defeated Collander's intent.

The voice plainly was that of Stipples, and it was peaceful enough.

"Invite him in," Rangy appeared to make a sudden decision.

Chance, he could see, had thrust Stipples across his pathway; and sooner or later chance must reveal all the deeds of the night. Stipples was here now, so discretion advised that he be housed up with the infuriated Dan Merrill until he, Rangy Pete, had once more vanished into the chaparral. For Stipples, a tool of Merrill's, would shortly tell all he knew, and that story would not add to Rangy's welcome in Triple Butte.

The thoughts were racing swiftly through his brain even as Collander went to the door, opened it cautiously and admitted Sheriff Stipples.

At first sight of the weapon which Rangy leveled upon him, Stipples' hands flew into the air.

"Got a sort of a quick habit, haven't you, Mr.

Stipples?" Rangy drawled. "And what might be bringing you around to Ike's so early in the morning? This weren't no invitation party, Stipples, 'cause little Dan and me has just been having a right fit understanding. Line up here beside Dan while I removes yore hardware. Now, peaceful like, what brings you here?"

"I was looking for Merrill," Stipples was frowning, and even in the uncertainty of the moment Rangy fancied that there was none of the old fawning which the man habitually displayed in the presence of the owner of the Snaky Y. "Burk Laxton got back early this morning, and he's got a queer story to tell about you, Merrill. His bank has put him on the job, and he says you've been shipping money into Triple Butte behind the backs of the banks. The banks out east say you've been dodging your debts there to pay them here, and we know you've been dodging them here. And now we find you've been shipping in money. What's it mean, Dan?"

In a quick flash of the moment, even while Merrill's face went white under the bronze, Rangy Pete could see what one of the swift answers must be. Merrill, it was evident, was working on some rather skilful plan to pit one set of creditors against the other, for some purpose of his own, while he quietly accumulated a mass of gold at the expense of both; but it was not Merrill's machinations which interested Rangy just now. It was, instead, the

surety that his part in the disappearance of that ten thousand must shortly become public knowledge.

So it was for him to act.

"You can find that out later, Stipples," Rangy broke in. "Talk it over after I'm gone. But now I want to collect a reward of two hundred dollars off little Danny here —"

"Two hundred?" Merrill growled. "What for?"

"For pointing out to you the man who took yore money out of Ike's store. I'm pointing at him now, Danny."

Rangy's finger, it was evident to all, was directed towards the astonished countenance of Sheriff Stipples. The latter's lips were working in amazement, while Merrill was scowling with fresh anger, and he was leaning forward slightly in the direction of the sheriff.

"That true, Stipples?" he bellowed. "You been double-crossing me?"

Stipples, it was apparent, was too much astonished at the quick turn of events to get his mental balance.

"Don't ask him that, Danny," Rangy inserted. "That ain't no proper kind of a question to ask any man. Ask him this — did you, Mr. Sheriff Stipples, take out of this room a box of evaporated apples what was all paint-smeared?"

While his eyes avoided the hostility which was leaping from Merrill's countenance, Stipples gulped

quickly and answered what seemed to be a simple question.

"I did," he said, "and you know, Rangy, that — "

Rangy held up a swift hand in protest.

"Not another word," he spoke sharply. "That ain't necessary at all. Now, Danny, you see I been earning that two hundred dollars reward, and I'll be troubling you for it right now."

Slowly, voicelessly, while his baleful eyes still rested upon Stipples, Merrill reached into his pocket and pulled forth a roll of bills.

"You count off two hundred, Ike," Rangy instructed tensely; and when Collander had accomplished the deed he returned the balance to Merrill.

Cautiously, with infinite relish, Rangy began to back slowly towards the rear door of the storeroom, but the bulk of his caution, he could see, was wasted effort. For the moment, the fevered Merrill had all but forgotten his presence. Instead, he was glaring at the sheriff, and the frightened Stipples was facing him with assumed bravado, but with a tinge of whiteness about the cheeks.

Rangy half closed the door, then he opened it again quickly.

"Ike," he spoke mildly, "if you wanta come with me — "

Collander gestured impatiently.

"Go away, Rangy," he protested, "I wanta see this."

Rangy closed the door softly and locked it from the outside; and as he did so he could hear the angered rumbling of Merrill's voice.

That rumbling had to do entirely with the misunderstanding which had grown up with Sheriff Stipples; but since it must be purely temporary, Rangy did not wait for the answer. It was an interlude which could be employed to better advantage. So a moment later he was walking briskly across the open stretch of plain to the cluster of chaparral where he had recently left the burnt-yellow cayuse.

At the most optimistic reckoning, he knew, it would be something less than a quarter of an hour before Merrill and Stipples would straighten out their tangle, before they could carve their way out of the Collander storeroom and raise the hue and cry.

CHAPTER X

WITH the conflict of storming thoughts about him, Rangy Pete rode swiftly along the trail set by Miss Dick the bandit. Bandit she was, full of all the wiles and trickeries of the world.

But to keep his mind clear of that torment, and of the biting memory of the tool she had made of him, Rangy tried to think of that pursuit which must, or which should be behind him.

It was an hour now since that incident in Ike Collander's storeroom, and as yet there had been no braying sounds of a racing army. Yet army there must be, setting out sooner or later upon his path, with grim lips, and with determination whipped into their faces by the lashing words of Merrill's anger.

The pursuit of that army, and its greed to inflict punishment, must be just as inevitable as was this other thing pressing at his brain, this nagging, whipping thought which mocked and taunted him, which whispered that Miss Dick, the bandit, had made of him a flexible tool, this thought with its corollary that he must track her down, even as he himself would be tracked down by the Snaky Y, and that when he found her — when he found her—what?

With an angry gesture, Rangy shook that thought from him. His mind, he knew, should be upon that army which even now must be forming behind him. For Rangy knew the interpretation which, even at this moment, must be placed upon his actions back in Triple Butte. He, to all outward appearances, and so far as they knew or cared, was the bandit who had stolen that ten thousand dollars in gold. He henceforth must be the object of their vengeful and unflagging pursuit. And beyond him, along this same trail was Miss Dick!

Again he shook his head angrily. Why must his thoughts be constantly straying back to her, to the girl who had mocked him, who had made of him a plaything which she had now cast aside? He would not think of her.

Back in Triple Butte that army would be forming. There had been delay, and there doubtless would be more, because the bulk of the Snaky Y punchers had ridden into the south through the night, seeking to block the trails which he had not followed. So Merrill must wait until their return. Perhaps even, no one had actually seen his retreat from the Colander store, and time must be lost in picking up his trail. An hour gained, perhaps two, or three, and that would help to find Miss Dick and warn her of the advancing army.

Once more Rangy struggled with his thoughts. They were such wilfully unconscious things, flitting

back to the girl so constantly; and even now he had found that they were still trying to shield her. That, at least, was a thing which he could overcome.

Still, looking at it from his own confused basis, he really could not take any chances just yet that Miss Dick should fall into the hands of the Snaky Y posse. There was his own attitude towards her which was as yet undetermined, and he must have time to see that it became properly formed. Back of it was the vague idea of punishment; but just what form that punishment should take was a matter which the turmoil of his brain had not yet worked out.

Punishment of some form there must be. For had she not taken him and played upon the thin strain of good within him? Had she not sought out the few fragments of his better nature and shaped them to her own purpose? And that was a sin which no woman should be permitted to work upon man.

Rangy's lips grew firmer and straighter. It was better now to give full sway to those turbulent thoughts which insisted upon molding the future of Miss Dick.

It was more calming to the brain to read into the days yet to come, and to find there the conviction that he must follow the girl until he found her, and that when he found her he must teach to her the inalienable fact that the thin strains of good in man

are too rare, too sacred, to become the toys of a woman's passing whim.

That was a clear and distinct purpose resolving itself out of the whirl of tormenting thoughts, and when it came and took definite shape before his brain it seemed to brush aside all those gibbering shadows which had been nagging him.

So, it was all clear now. The one definite aim of life must be to find Miss Dick and to teach to her this code of man!

How calm and reasoning his brain became under the soothing of that resolve! All things else, he could see now, must be submerged to that single end. That meant that he must not, he dare not, take any chances that the punchers of the Snaky Y would find Miss Dick before he came up with her. It meant that he must not follow so openly the trail she had ridden in the night. Further, if need be, it implied that he must leave her trail, must draw aside the pursuit of the Snaky Y in order to shield her for his own punishment.

Rangy Pete drew the burnt-yellow cayuse to a sudden halt at the edge of a clump of chaparral. Not a sound in the world about him, except the vague murmurings of the ranges. Not a living thing within the limits of his eye. The firm resolve was upon him.

At the next thin point in Miss Dick's trail, he would blind it so that the hurrying posse would swing into the pursuit of him alone, and then, some

time later in the great future, when he had shaken aside the anger of Dan Merrill and the Snaky Y, he would find the girl, and he would teach her that code of man.

It was more satisfying thus to see before him a surer future, even though it doubtless did mean riding into that tangled land of hills and forests beyond the Pass, into the very home of the Dervishers. But if that were needed, it would be all the keener teaching to the girl who had tricked him so calmly. She had tricked him. And he had thought, once or twice, that there had been a slight softening in her eyes when he turned about quickly and surprised her looking at him. Folly. Surprised her? Rangy Pete laughed aloud. Studied, vampirish glances, that was all. A cold-blooded harpy who flocked with bandits!

Slowly, under the emotion of the moment, his hands ran down the breast of his khaki shirt, and beneath his fingers there was the faint crumpling of paper. The feel of that brought more laughter to his lips. Miss Dick's last message to him. Mockery again, he presumed. Swiftly he drew out the envelope and slit it open. There, before his eyes, a scrawled announcement, like an old-time business card:

Miss Dick, Bandit,

Plain Highwaymanry Neatly Done.

Terms Reasonable. Fine Openings for Recruits.
Appointments, Thursdays, The Crag, South Butte.

Taunting him, this time! Rangy Pete crushed the paper in his fingers; then he tore it into tiny fragments and scattered it into the air.

Mocking him, was she, off there from the stronghold of the hills? And never yet had man or woman mocked Rangy Pete without finding a swift answer to their challenge. The future was growing clear with the passing of the minutes. For this was Thursday, and tonight he would meet her at The Craggs, though the whole army of the Snaky Y were at his heels.

It was clearer now than ever before. All through the day he could lay down a tangled course for the riders of the Snaky Y to follow, then, when the thickening of night threw its shield about him, he could ride straight for the Craggs, that catacomb land of the south butte standing out there premier of the jagged sentinels which had given to Triple Butte its name.

With this purpose upon him, Rangy rode through the day, and from time to time as he looked over his shoulder upon the higher levels, he could see the churned-up dust marking the far skyline. At sight of that he always laughed.

Dust upon the skyline! The strange mockery of that! How many times had he not ridden in a posse which stirred up the dust of the plains just as those riders behind him were doing now? And now it was himself out in front, with others thirsting for

his punishment. Then, when he laughed, he rode on; for there was a new flame in his blood.

"Fine opening for recruits," Miss Dick had written.

Miss Dick, the blue-eyed round-cheeked rider, with the wistful glances which cut through the crust of life and somehow found lodgment in the seat of emotion; Miss Dick the lure, the vampire who dragged men in and made bandits of them, and then, no doubt, threw them aside for new victims! The flame grew brighter in Rangy's cheeks. Thank God he had been warned against *that*!

Before him now, in the westering sky, the sun slipping down towards the tips of the buttes. The dull, gray spires of butte land standing before him in solemn majesty, with their dun ranks bleak and frowning and uninviting. Cold and hard and drab off there, in the dying glare of the sun. Cold, with all the cruelty of nature whose laws are inflexible and unforgiving. Cold as the heart of a woman!

What else could he have expected from Miss Dick, or from any woman nurtured upon the iron of the hills? An iron life off there in the drab buttes, iron without and iron within — a constant battle with the reign of nature and the will of the plainsmen!

If *his* life had been a persistent bowing before the law of brute survival, what must have been the life of Miss Dick? Folly! Weakness! Why think of that?

Red and hazy, the sun dropped through the film of the upper horizon, slipped down behind the buttes,

and the long, thickening fingers of the shadows crept out towards Rangy Pete. It was time to ride directly for the Crag.

Rangy threaded his way through a tortuous defile, followed the draw while it grew narrower and steeper, and toiled up a slope until it mounted a summit of rock. At the summit, he paused to look backward through the encroaching shadows. It was lighter off there on the tumbling plains, for the slanting sun still tilted over the buttes and painted pale patterns over the chaparral. Off there, in the far space, was a purple haze sitting just above the checkered patchwork of the ranges.

In that film of purple haze was a torn gap of fleecy gray, which fluttered and died and fluttered again. It rose and fell like folds of smoke tossed about in the breeze; but thin and vaporish as it was, it told its own story to Rangy Pete.

"Yellow boy, there's a neat army back there," he addressed the patient cayuse, "but we lost them a bit this afternoon. I'm guessing now that we have two hours the start of them, and that should be enough to see — the vampire up here at the Crag."

For a moment he watched the fluttering of that film cloud, then he turned abruptly and plunged into the shadows of butte land. A strange race this he was running, with the pursuers at his heels, and he at the heels of another pursued!

Through the butte land draw he raced, up rock-

strewn summits, through shadow-tinted valleys, climbing ever to an upper level, piercing always towards the heart of that cave-dotted southern butte which had earned the name of The Crag. It was a simple course he was following, without the tanglings of the plains to confuse the pursuers; and Rangy Pete had no hope that the army of the Snaky Y would lose the trail out there upon the ranges before they plunged into the twilight of butte land.

Rangy had no hope that he could shake off the pursuers; rather, he gave them barely a thought at all; for there was whirling through his brain the knowledge that off here, a few more miles through the shadows, was Miss Dick the highwayman.

At one moment a qualm of doubt touched him, and there dashed through his brain the memory that the girl had not said whether she would be alone or accompanied by a band from the Dervishers. And if the latter were the case, who could say what strange battle he might have to fight out for freedom. That thought drew him to a slower pace, as he contemplated the embarrassment of being caught between the Dervishers and the Snaky Y; then shortly he spurred back to his old speed. Miss Dick would be awaiting him alone, off there at the edge of the valley which marked the foot of the Crag.

Yet when finally the burnt-yellow cayuse stepped out into the dim shadow land of the valley, Rangy slipped from its back cautiously, and he loosened

one six-gun in its holster. In this manner he slipped forward, with infinite caution, until he came to the sheer face of the cliffs. He used the same deliberate care, with his senses attuned for the minutest of sound or message, as he began to thread the darkened defile between the cliffs which marked the boulder-strewn passageway into the draw beyond. Silence everywhere, silence eerie and unnerving, which but accentuated his consciousness that all about him were the staring eyes of those caves of crag land, which might or might not at this instant be shielding the eyes of Dervishers.

Hostile silence in the air about! Dun and dreary walls of cliffs climbing ever upward until their tips were blended with the sky above. A lonely hole, this, even in the glare of day. A place where tragedy might reign, and man be none the wiser!

Silence clinging about him with its hostile menace! Not even the flapping wings of night-birds, or the husking call of mating creatures. Silence, dun, and black and dreary!

Thank goodness, he was coming to the end of this night-smeared defile. The cliffs were widening out. It was growing brighter out here, and sooner or later, with this blackness shaken from him, there would be the pale paintings of the rising moon.

Rangy stepped forward more quickly, more confidently. Then abruptly he paused, as the consciousness of a nearby presence was carried to him through

the lessening dark. He looked about swiftly, but saw nothing. Then the coldness of a human voice reached his ears.

"You're covered, young man, whoever you are. The best thing you can do is to start reaching for the stars. It's the most healthy thing I know of."

It was only the continued sound of the voice which told Rangy Pete where the speaker stood, but once heard, that voice was such a simple thing to follow. The speaker could be nothing else but that dark lump which looked like an excrescence of rock upon the boulder in front of him. Rangy's lips parted grimly through the darkness. It would be such an easy thing, that sprawling fall of his with its shot from the ground. But that was impossible, for the voice was the voice of Miss Dick!

And as yet he had not determined his attitude towards her, except that it must be one of punishment, one of teaching her that old code of mankind. At the best, it must be hostility.

"You got rider's cramp," the cold voice went on, "or why ain't you putting them up?"

Rangy raised his hands slowly into the air.

"I shore ain't got no objections to reaching, if that'll rest yore eyes any," Rangy replied; then broke off at the sound of a low chuckle of laughter.

So that was to be the girl's attitude? Laughter,

friendship, when but a few short hours ago she had tricked him into stealing for her some ten thousand dollars in gold! She had made of him this outcast which he had become; yet the sound of her subdued laughter was still ringing through his brain.

"So it's you, Rangy Pete?" the girl resumed, in a much altered tone. "I thought it might be, but one can never afford to take chances in the buttes. You can take them down."

Rangy's hands continued to waver in the air.

"I said you could take them down," the girl reminded.

"Shore I heard you the first time," Rangy returned, quite coldly. "If it's all the same to you, I'll be leaving them up."

"Of all the absurd things!" Miss Dick laughed more freely. "Of course, if you happen to have a bet with yourself, leave them there."

"It ain't absurd, an' it ain't no bet," Rangy informed, with the same degree of coldness. "You got the drop on me, Miss Dick, an' I ain't gonna take no advantage of you."

This time the girl did not answer directly. Something strange in Rangy's manner, or in his words, appeared to penetrate the surface situation and give her cause for thought. For a full minute Rangy was conscious that Miss Dick was attempting to study him through the darkness, and he noticed that when she spoke again her voice was cool and

even, with no suggestion of its earlier laughter. For an instant that piqued him. He had liked that laughter in her voice, laughter which had come from her gladness in his presence. But no. He was forgetting for the moment that she was the lure beckoning him to the ranks of the Dervishers. He must forget, as well, that he had ever liked the sound of her voice or the flash of her eyes.

"I don't think I understand what you mean," Miss Dick returned, as though measuring her words. "What advantage could you possibly take of me under the circumstances?"

Rangy Pete abruptly discovered that the situation was much more difficult than he had imagined it could ever be.

"I could pretend to be friendly," he replied with an effort which was not apparent in his tones.

"Pretend?" the girl echoed in some surprise, and it was still evident to Rangy that she did not yet understand; then, as though she abruptly gathered the significance of his words, she exclaimed, "And aren't you friendly?"

The direct challenge was hardly what Rangy had anticipated. He would have liked to avoid the answer, and in his anxiety to ferret out the least damaging reply he dropped his hands to his side thoughtlessly. Miss Dick evidently overlooked the act, for she still seemed to be listening expectantly for his answer.

"Didn't you pretend this morning you were so friendly you just had to see me again?" the girl prompted.

"This mornin' ain't now, an' they's a hull lot of things can happen in a few hours," Rangy returned slowly. "They's some things comes in afore friendship."

Through the uncertain silence which followed, Rangy Pete's gaze did not leave that dark smudge which was the outline of Miss Dick. He could not tell what strange phase of thought might be controlling the mind of the girl, and in this moment he discovered that he knew nothing whatever of the code which must rule the life of a woman reared and hardened by the brigandage of the Dervishers. She was struggling, he fancied, to understand him; and when she did understand, the answer might come sharp and swift. For she was cold and hard as the buttes themselves. And if, when the mask of his purpose was thrown aside — if, when she read the motive of his presence, she should attempt violence — what then?

Rangy Pete's fingers, dangling at his sides, closed and unclosed firmly. If that dark outline upon the rocks beyond were but a man, the answer would be simple. But a woman? What had the code of the plains taught him would be the duty of a man, should a woman strike, wantonly? To strike back? To shoot first? That would be so simple. For Rangy

knew there never yet was a woman who could be so swift on the draw as he.

It was not a matter of speed, but of code. Should any man stand calmly still while a woman shot him down in cold blood? Rangy's fingers closed and unclosed again. Never, in all the stories of the ranges which had reached his ears, had there been a situation just like this. Never, perhaps, had there been a case just like his from beginning to end. Assuredly, man had not gone out before to teach to woman the lesson which he had thought to teach to Miss Dick. And he had bungled it. Because of that he was standing now, watching for the faintest move of her hands, watching and wondering what the girl would do when the force of his message reached her brain.

As he watched, he became conscious that the intensity of darkness was giving place to a softening glow of silver peering in upon them from above the rims of the buttes. It was a glow which threw out in clearer line the form of the girl upon the rock, and which must shortly bathe this whole valley with its radiance. But the girl's features were still hidden.

"If you do not come in friendship, there can be only one way you have come," the girl spoke suddenly, with a questioning note in her voice. There was, as well, a youthful surprise in her tones, as though some new and unexpected situation had been

thrust upon her. "If you do not come in friendship, you must come as an enemy," she continued more slowly, as one who reasoned aloud, "and if you come as an enemy, you — you — " Miss Dick controlled her emotions with a palpable effort, "you tricked me back there in the chaparral this morning. You talked your silly words, and I believed you — "

"No, 'twa'n't that," Rangy Pete interrupted, with his gaze still resting upon the girl's motionless hands. "Yer lookin' in the right direction, but they's a cloud in front of you. Yer puttin' it kinda strong when you got me corralled with yore enemies, an' when yer talkin' about playin' tricks, they's folks not so far from here what'd make me look like a amatoor. Beggin' yore pardon, Miss, but I jest been moochin' out here to tell you that you roped me slicker'n I ever been roped before. They's some folks what'd say that Rangy Pete is rope shy; but, Miss, you shore roped me good and plenty. An' now I'm wantin' to tell you it ain't no kind of a thing for a lady to do."

"You seemed to approve of me quite early this morning," Miss Dick replied in a voice from which all trace of friendship had vanished, "but that, I suppose, was merely pretence, to help you find out something about me — "

"It was before I knew much about you," Rangy broke in. "Before I found out youse one of the slickest persons what ever descended upon Triple

Butte. I'm wantin', Miss, to let you know that I recognizes good work when I sees it. I mean slick work. But now that I've took off my hat to yore smooth work, Miss, I'm lettin' you know that I'm here to tell you it can't be done."

Miss Dick chose that moment to laugh easily.

"Queer, isn't it," she remarked, "with all the words there are in the English language, you can't find enough to tell me what you mean."

Laughing at him now, was she? Before, she had mocked him, had thought to toy with his emotions.

"They ain't no trouble, Miss, finding the word what fits you," Rangy returned, "but I'm kinda hesitatin' to use it. If I said it to a man, they'd shore be a bit of shootin' right away, an' as I don't wanta have to shoot you up, Miss, I'm a hangin' onto my words fer all I'm worth. They's some things what a fellow likes to say without usin' the words, so, Miss, if you'll sorta get it into yore head what I'm wantin' to say, an' if you'll roll it about there a bit at a time it won't hurt so bad as though I's to tell you right out loud, all to once, that youse the smoothest, slickest lady high-flyer I ever run up against."

Rangy Pete, watching closely through the growing moon gleam, saw that the girl's fingers clenched and unclenched swiftly. Then she sat quite still, as she studied him with a slow, cold, methodical care. Even through the film of the shadowy moonlight

which concealed the details of her features and cloaked her emotions, he could tell that Miss Dick was perfectly calm. In time, he found himself wishing that she had been less calm, wishing that the iron of the hills had not robbed her of the tempestuous passions which should have been hers, wishing for the swift action of an angered woman rather than this cold silent play of a cautious man. In the end, he found himself glad at the sound of her voice, though that voice was calm and unemotional as the hills about.

"I could accept that as a compliment, if I chose," the girl's voice was saying, "or as commendation, or as a rebuke, or perhaps even as punishment. It depends entirely upon the personal viewpoint. There have been times, Mr. Rangy Pete, when a remark like that, coming from a plainsman, would have made me tilt my head a little higher in the air; but somehow you seem different. Just why, Rangy Pete, have you taken advantage of the note I gave you to come over here and pick a quarrel with me?"

Rangy started to laugh; then he stopped abruptly. Could it be possible, after all, that Miss Dick did not appreciate the seriousness of her conduct? Her words flowed freer and smoother than anything he had ever heard; there was about her a polish and culture which he had never known before; yet, there was, as well, that iron of the buttes which was her mothering.

“ ’Cause of the way you roped me into helpin’ you steal that ten thousand dollars in gold. I gotta admit — ”

Miss Dick laughed with surprising suddenness. There was back of her laugh a gladness, which seemed to say that their threatened misunderstanding had been founded upon such a trivial thing, and that now it was all swept aside. Miss Dick continued to laugh, in soft, low notes which fell as harmony upon the growing moonlight; and Rangy Pete, listening through their melody, found in them no mockery.

For an instant Rangy’s left hand strayed up and toyed with the tip of his left ear.

“So you admit it was good work, Mr. Rangy Pete,” she replied, at length. “I thought you would, when you got a good look at it. But what in the world are you doing up there on your high horse? It wasn’t your money. You haven’t lost anything by it. Besides, you have my thanks, Mr. Pete, for you were really helpful. Except for you, I hardly believe it could have been done.”

The girl broke off with another low ripple of laughter, and Rangy Pete continued to stare through the moongleam. He stared until in time the growing moonlight threw the girl’s countenance out in dull relief against the darkness of the surrounding rocks, until her glance, meeting his across the thinning film of night, came to him with a frankness and

confidence, with a mingling touch of humor, which he could not understand.

"Why don't you say something, and not stand there like you'd lost your tongue?" Miss Dick demanded, with a trace of peevishness in her manner

Still Rangy Pete did not answer. The revelation which the girl's manner seemed to bring to him was such an astonishing one. It was almost unthinkable that Miss Dick should be what she appeared to be at this moment, that she could be all guilelessness and innocence, seeing no wrong in her actions, that she should be eager for the faint praise which he had spoken, that she could believe that her acts should stand out to be judged solely upon the success they had won.

"Don't you understand, Mr. Pete," the girl resumed more coldly, "that I am not in the habit of thanking men. Yet I have thanked you, and you only stand there and stare."

Rangy Pete laughed abruptly, and felt more at his ease.

Vampirish, and nothing more. This innocence of all wrong-doing was nothing more than a foolish mask which she had drawn over her past to blind his senses and to trick him as she had tricked him before.

"You're doing it fairish well, Miss Dick, you shore are, but they's no use tryin' to put it over me again.

I shore am rope shy this time, and yore innocent little gurglin' laughter ain't gonna get you nowhere after this. They's no use tryin' to pull the wool over this boy's eyes any longer. You used him once to do the fat pickin' for you, an' you did'n care, did you, if it made him a thief or a crook, or what it made of him? Perhaps yer kinda forgettin' that all some folks back in Triple Butte has got to do is use their head, an' then they'll go around sayin' that Rangy Pete's the person what stole that ten thousand. Miss, they's a hull lot of things what friends an' some others can say about me, but they can't say nohow that I've ever been a thief, and, Miss, I don't reckon ever to give them the chance. I don't know if you get what I'm a driftin' at, but if you'll shake them ideas around in yore head a bit you'll see that they ain't no use of you thinkin' you're going to get away with that ten thousand."

All the laughter left Miss Dick's features, and her eyes grew wide and sober through the moonlight. For a moment it seemed that the delayed flash of passion was creeping to her brain, then, as though with an effort, she became calm again.

"And what are you going to do about it?" she demanded.

"That depends a hull lot on you, Miss," Rangy returned slowly. "Back there in Triple Butte, when certain things leaks out, they've got me branded as a crook. I ain't no crook, an' I gotta prove it;

that's all they is to it. I been sorta thinkin' that the best way to show 'em I ain't the crook is to take the real crook to them."

Rangy Pete watched the girl's hands for some swift action, but for a minute or more Miss Dick barely moved. She leaned forward a trifle, and her eyes grew wider, as though some new phase of the world were being opened before her wondering mind; but beyond that there was nothing to betray the girl's real mood.

Rangy laughed softly to himself. It was all acting again, acting the pose of the innocent.

"Is it, then, such a terrible thing to be a crook?" Miss Dick asked abruptly.

"I'm thinkin' I already told you they ain't no use trying that girlish, giggly stuff any more. You tried to make a crook out of me, Miss Dick, by takin' advantage of a sort of weak spot in me, an' then you hinted in that little letter that you'd make a recruit out of me and put me on with the Der-vishers — "

"You are the first man who ever got such a chance, from me," the girl interrupted, but Rangy Pete went on, unheeding.

"I'm not sayin' but what I thank you for the compliment, Miss, but they's only one way I can show you I ain't all them things you took me for, an' that's to take you back to Triple Butte and hand you over to Mr. Stipples."

The girl's right hand moved swiftly, but Rangy Pete's voice, calm and emotionless, went on.

"You see, Miss, while I been standin' here I got this whole thing sized up. That's why you're a lookin' into my six-gun right now. I'm tellin' you, Miss Dick, I don't wanta hafta spoil them purty fingers of yours, but if you start any monkey-work I'll have to shoot one of them into the air. You been askin' me if it's such a terrible thing to be a crook, but that ain't the hull thing, Miss. You gotta use yore head in this. You used me to steal some ten thousand dollars for you, 'cause they happens to be one little streak of good in me and you found it and worked it out. Miss Dick, I ain't got the words to say what I mean, but 'cause you done what you done, I'm takin' you back to Sheriff Stipples, an' I'm gonna tell him all I knows about that ten thousand. They's some things what no person, not even a woman, can do in this world, an' that'll give you somethin' to work yore head on while we're a moochin' it back to Triple Butte. Now, Miss, you'd better stick them purty fingers of yores into the air, fer I'm comin' over to get yore gun."

The girl's lips, he could see, had grown tight, and her eyes had narrowed. Her fingers clenched swiftly, then relaxed. She threw her arms into the air with a yielding gesture; yet upon her features there was a look of wonderment.

Rangy Pete stepped over and calmly removed the girl's gun from its holster.

"I just done that to keep you from doin' anything rash," Rangy informed, "'cause they's some talkin' we gotta do. I been tellin' you, Miss, that I'm gonna take you back to Triple Butte, an' that stands. But I ain't gonna take advantage of you like what you took it of me. I caught you here, kinda under false pretences, so I'm gonna put it up to you square, Miss, to do some thinkin'. You can have about a few hours to think it over; then you can say whether you come back to Triple Butte with me, peaceful like, er if I'm to let you go again. If you think you've done the square thing by me, why I'll shore unrope you, Miss, an' let you go. An' when you've gone, I'll be settin' out after you agin, an' I won't never stop long's I'm alive, till I've got you. An' when I've got you, I'll teach you that you can't take what's good in man and turn it into mud. You gotta learn that lesson some day, Miss, but it's fer you to say when you start. If you thinks I ain't done the square thing by comin' to you thisaway, why, I lets you go again, an' I gives you a fair chance to get away. But if you go, Miss, they ain't nothing in this world what's gonna stop me catchin' up with you some day. That's what I wanted you to know, so you could get to thinkin' right away."

When Rangy Pete began to talk, he saw that a

smile of scorn came to the girl's lips; but shortly the scorn vanished and in its place the lips parted slightly and the eyes widened, as though Miss Dick found herself face to face with something she could not understand. Even when he had finished, the girl continued to stare at him with wide, frank eyes, with eyes which were curiously speculative, innocently confused, or shrewdly contemplative, as the quick-flitting emotions raced through her brain and registered their passing in her eyes alone. At one moment, he believed she would laugh aloud in mockery; in an instant there was a softness, a pathetic tenderness in her eyes which seemed to tell him that she was feeling out beyond the only world she had ever known, with all the innocence of a trusting child; in a flash that had vanished and she was looking upon him with a cold suspicion which spoke all too plainly of the iron which was the soul of her mothering hills; in a swift twist of the head that, too, was gone, and in its place there was a mingling of doubt and longing, a grasping out for understanding, a wavering admission that this world of the ranges was an unknown land, with its strange codes and its still stranger men; then that mood in its turn was washed from her features, and the dominating note became the primitive weapon used by all the Eves since ever the world began.

As she sat there now, staring upon him so child-

ishly, with the curiously innocent eyes which asked for understanding, which recognized neither folly nor weakness in the things of the past, but which spoke only of a life lived in accord with the prompting of nature, Rangy Pete rubbed his eyes slowly and blinked through the moonlight.

How youth, that great and glowing soul of the universe, youth, with its irresponsible follies and its swift flashes of repentant sorrows, claimed her now! How youth reached out and twined its fingers about her. Youth, with the ameliorating touches of the moonlight which softened the quick flame of her emotions, with the softly creeping moonlit dark which played with the fingers of phantasy about her; youth, youth, that ever glowing, radiant thing, that gently childish, touching thing, claimed her now. Youth? The youth, which he himself had lost; yet which stole back into his veins now with the quickening pulse of wine clamoring at the brain! Youth, with its bright eyes, its wide eyes — curse her!

Youth, with its innocent, guileless lips, with its slow-growing, wondering smile, which seemed but a part of the saddening moonlight, which begged for friendship, which whispered of the loneliness of a lonely soul in the wide world of unreality, which touched some far-off chord in the heart and set to echoing the music of the silent night — youth, with its lips which smiled, with the vague moonlight all

about, with the silence of the vast world — youth, with eyes which sparkled, which taunted, which pleaded — youth, youth, with its gladness, its sadness, its innocence; youth set in the stagery of the mystery of the mystic night, with the giant tableau of the giant hills all about; youth, so frank, so helpless, so pleading — youth, leaning towards him now, with that smile upon her lips, that moonlight in her hair, that deep, childish wonder in her eyes—

God! The pity of it all. Rangy Pete clenched his hands savagely. This could *not* be acting, for no acting in the world could reach through the surface of life as the girl's manner was going, no acting could reach beyond the crust of living and peer into the mystic chambers of the soul. Rangy Pete brushed one hand before his eyes. The witchery of the girl and the moonlight! Youth, looking out now, with wide-staring eyes, into a world which it had never seen before. Youth, looking for the first time upon a new code of life, a code which says that each man has a neighbor and that littleness towards man does not make up the greatness of living.

As Rangy Pete stood there and watched the fingers of emotion playing their patterns over her moon-lit face, he wondered how many years there would be to her youth. He had not thought of it in just that way before. He had thought of her at first as a glad-faced, yet precocious boy. She had

the same slim, trim figure of a growing youth, the same arrogant poise of the head, and up to this moment there had been the same fearless glance of her challenging blue eyes. He had not thought of her before as being gifted with any mere number of years, yet now, with that childish wonder still shining from her eyes, it came to him suddenly that the number of her years would be a vastly important thing. For youth, great youth, must be forgiven much.

"How old are you, girl?" he demanded abruptly.

Miss Dick drew back with a gasp, as though the portal to some new universe had been suddenly closed in her face. In a quick fling of her head, the wonder, the childishness, the innocence, were swept from her face; and in their place there came that cold suspicion which was the iron of the boundless buttes.

"What does it matter how old I am?" Miss Dick challenged calmly, though some of the doubt of youth lingered in her voice.

Rangy Pete laughed sharply, almost with relief.

"It don't, now," he declared, "though I kinda figured a minute ago that it had somethin' to do with things. I can see now that it wa'n't nothin' but the moonlight. It's funny what the moonlight can do up here in the hills when you ain't used to it, Miss. Down on the ranges it's kinda different. It don't play no tricks on a person. Now if it ain't

pushin' you too much, Miss, I'd sorta like you to do some thinkin'. How long do you think it'll take you, Miss, to make up yore mind whether you'll come with me now peaceful like, er if I'm to let you go?"

There was a suggestion of the old flash of innocence upon the girl's features when she looked at him again. At least, Rangy Pete found upon her face a definite trace of sincerity which reminded him of youthful innocence.

"If I go with you now, you intend to give me up to the sheriff and charge me with stealing that ten thousand dollars?" she asked.

"And prove the charge," Rangy supplemented. "They ain't no gettin' round that, Miss. All I gotta do is step in the box an' tell what I knows about things."

Miss Dick did not dispute the point. She appeared to admit the strength of his reasoning by averting her face and considering the silver-tipped fringe of the buttes.

"And if I do not go with you now, of my own accord, you will let me go, give me a start, and take your chances of finding me some other day?" the girl pressed.

"That ain't plumb true with what I said," Rangy corrected. "What I said was that I'd shore round you up, if it took all the days what I got left."

Miss Dick reflected, while she drummed her heels

upon the rock. "How much start would you give me?" she insisted.

"Anythin' you ask, Miss, from a day to a month. I could'n give you no more'n a month."

Again Miss Dick fell back upon her own thoughts, but this time she was immersed in their depths for such a length of time that Rangy Pete grew restless.

"All I'm askin' you, Miss, is to tell me how long you need to make up yore mind. They ain't no hurry about it —"

Miss Dick chose that moment to laugh. "You poor ninny," she declared. "What is the use of you going back to Triple Butte without the ten thousand dollars? You might take me back and tell your little story to the sheriff, but who is going to believe you, unless you take the money back too? Who is going to believe you, especially if I say you knew all the time that the money was in the box of Merrill's apples? You mustn't forget, Mr. Rangy Pete, that they don't grow bandits in the buttes without heads on them. Suppose, after you tell your little story that I tell the sheriff you were in on the deal all the time, and that you got cranky when Dervisher Dick wouldn't give you a big slice of the ten thousand. While I have been thinking, Mr. Pete, I've found about a dozen things I could say to Mr. Sheriff that wouldn't make you look like a town hero back in Triple Butte. Have you thought about that?"

Rangy Pete took a few steps forward, then he leaned up against the rock upon which the girl was seated. He tilted back his sombrero so that the moonlight fell full upon his face, and though it softened some of the lines which the desert-life had bitten into his years, it still showed to the girl a face which was calm and fixed, with some of the old calm hardness of the hills themselves.

"I'm thinkin', Miss, that they ain't anythin' in this whole business what I ain't thought about," he declared slowly. "I've had a whole lot of hours to do my thinkin', and they's only the one thing what counts. Miss, I don't come into this at all. I don't count no more'n a hitchin' post what you'd shoot full of holes. What happens to me don't make no difference nohow. The person what counts is you — and you gotta learn, Miss Dick, that you can't mine a man fer all the good that's in him, an' get away with it. So, Miss, don't you get to thinkin' none about what's gonna happen to me. You jest keep rememberin' that I'm gonna take you back to Triple Butte, an' if it ain't tomorrer er the next day, it'll shore be some other day. That's all you gotta think about, Miss."

For a moment it seemed that the girl's eyes flashed through the moonlight, but if that were true, the flash was gone instantly, and in its place there came a mixture of docility and that youthful innocence which but a short time before had puzzled Rangy Pete.

"Very well," the girl conceded, "I will let you know in the morning, seeing that you are so sure about it. Now, will you go on away and leave me alone. I suppose you can trust me not to run away through the night. Or if I did, you would catch me anyway."

Miss Dick broke off with a suggestion of resentful laughter, and when she tossed her head arrogantly the moonlight flashed back from the glitter of her eyes. Storm-tossed in her moods! Rangy Pete smiled inwardly, though his lips did not move. She had not dismissed him at once, with the imperiousness which should have been hers. So she was wavering!

Miss Dick, the arrogant, the cool-headed bandit, was wavering now! Or did it mean that some faint, far-off strain of good within her had been touched by the stand he had taken? Good, within her? Rangy's spirit laughed bitterly, though his face was moveless. Good? Too young for that. Too accursed with the wayward self-interest of youth.

"Shore, I can leave you here if you want me to," Rangy replied calmly, "but the Merrill punchers'd have you in an hour or two, and I ain't got a hankering for you to fall into Merrill's hands — "

"What does Merrill know about this place?" the girl demanded.

"Nothing, except that a whole army is following me. Want to hear about it?"

The swift nod of the head and the flash of the blue

eyes told Rangy Pete that Miss Dick had become anxious for the details of the past. So he furnished them, with his own wealth of expression, watching the far-off slumbering shadows of emotion which rose to the girl's eyes as he talked; and he amplified those recent incidents with a definite latent enjoyment until suddenly he became conscious of the fact that it was pleasant to stand thus, looking up into the girl's wondering eyes. When he became aware of that, Rangy broke off sharply.

"So we'd better be mooching it," he concluded. "There's nothing for it, Miss, but to follow this trail we're now on. I'm hoping you know where it goes. I've never been up this draw more'n about ten-twenty miles — "

Miss Dick glanced at him swiftly, with a strange light in her eyes, then she looked away again. "All right, we'll go," she concluded. "I know the way."

Rangy delayed the departure while he returned the girl's revolver, then he mounted the burnt-yellow cayuse, and side by side they rode up the winding valley of the draw, along the bright pathway of silver which the moon laid down before them.

CHAPTER XI

SOMEWHERE behind them, as they rode, Rangy knew, were the hurrying riders of the posse. Far off, along this route which Miss Dick had chosen, was the tangled land of the Dervishers. All about them were the pyramids of buttes, rising up above this magic valley land and throwing into the obscurity of gloom the whole of the world except that one narrow pathway which stretched out clear and crisp in the glow of the moon. The glad light of the moon stole over the rim of the buttes, and it filmed all the air about with a smoky haze which stretched on and on before the eye to even greater distance than ran this silver pathway.

The air of night was crisp and cool and dry, with no faint suggestion of the heat of the day. There was in it an exhilaration like the touch of wine; there was a response in the quick surge of blood through the veins of youth. Behind them were the riders of the plains, forgotten for a time beneath the magic spell of the butte lands.

Rangy Pete, who had ridden the ranges and the hills through many a strange day and many a stranger night, knew that this silvering touch of the

moon painted the iron of the buttes in its most caressing mood; he knew that never could nature come nearer to bowing before the sentiments of man; and because of that knowledge he glanced over at the silent figure of the girl at his side.

Perhaps Miss Dick felt something of the same softening touch of the hills, for abruptly she swept off her sombrero, and she rode on silently through the night, with the stray wisps of her hair floating out to catch something of the shimmer of the moonlight.

Rangy Pete rode just as silently, wondering at the picture of her, as she sat her cayuse with all the superb ease of a careless boy, as the moonbeams toyed about her and tried to paint out for the time being all the drab days of her past. As she rode there so silently, with the magic of the solemn hills, of the deep mysterious shadows, of the glad-glimmering moon, thrown out as a giant stagery about her, Rangy Pete found it hard to believe that this boyish figure, with its quietly solemn face, was the same Miss Dick against whom he had been compelled to declare war.

Along the winding pathway of the butte lands; through deep patches of night-cooled shadow which by day would be burning to the touch; through the open, boulder-strewn glades where the moonlight glimmered and mingled with the haze of night; following the twisting course of the draw, up sharp

grades, and down into the mystery of blackened valleys over which the hesitating haze of night hung like a film-cloud, Rangy Pete made his way, still at the side of Miss Dick the bandit. At times, as they climbed out of some darkened valley through the film of night, as their heads rose up through the vaporish aura which circled over these hill-pocketed valleys, as they came up near the crest of some butte and looked down upon the whole world dancing away before them in the arms of the moonlight, Rangy Pete felt something of the poignant beauty of living. It would be wonderful to wander on and on like this forever, to forget that there was a great world out beyond this magic land of night, to forget that in these same hills there were burning days, to remember only the present with its instant joys. Rangy shrugged his shoulders sharply. If only one could forget the past and the inevitable future!

In that moment of temptation, a trace of anger came to his brain. Why should he care about the petty deeds of the world? Life was a gift thrust unasked into the hands of every man, a prize to be lived to the ultimate or a bauble to be cast aside; so what mattered to him the tiny life of Triple Butte or of the plains beyond, as long as there were trails such as this to be ridden at night, with a girl like this whose floating wisps of hair could shine so gloriously in the moonlight?

Rangy Pete was still pondering that point, when

Miss Dick, looking along the moonlit trail ahead to a point where it dipped sharply into the shadows, abruptly broke the long silence.

"Has it occurred to you to wonder just where I am taking you?" she asked suddenly.

"Does it matter?" Rangy Pete replied, with the mystery of the night still upon him.

"That is for you to say," Miss Dick returned, quite without emotion. "A few hours ago you seemed angered at the mere thought of joining the Dervishers. Even the suggestion seemed to touch you upon a raw spot. Does your answer mean that you have changed your mind?"

"Not as long as I got a mind of my own," Rangy returned.

"Then you really are quite simple after all," Miss Dick went on, with calm emphasis, "and it does matter where I happen to be taking you. Suppose I should tell you that we passed a Dervisher camp in the last valley, that there is another in the valley immediately ahead, that there is no way out of this trail but forward or back, and that all I need to do to bring a swarm of men about me is to fire off my revolver. What happens then to your boast to take me out to Triple Butte? You know there are men among the Dervishers who would jump to do anything I ask, big or small — "

"An' a bit of shootin' would look small to them," Rangy suggested.

Miss Dick seemed temporarily angered. She remained in silence while they passed through the darkened valley, while they climbed its ridge and on into a series of valleys and hills beyond.

"What I mean is — how do you know I am not leading you into the Dervisher camp?" she asked at length. "There are any number of men there who would — "

"That's what I'm hopin' you'll do," Rangy returned imperturbably, "since you been a talkin' to me about that ten thousand dollars in gold, I been doin' some thinkin', an' I agree with you, Miss, that I'd otta take that money back with me when we go in to Triple Butte. So, Miss, if it ain't askin' too much of you, I'd shore be obliged if you'd lead the way to the Dervisher camp an' show me where they got that ten thousand cached."

"What would you do with it, if you got your fingers on it in an easy way like that?" Miss Dick demanded.

"Same as if I got it in a hard way, er by havin' to shoot a couple of persons. It's all the same to me. It'd have to go back to the person it belongs to, an' that happens to be Rough House Dan Merrill. They ain't no fun handin' ten thousand of anythin' over to Dan Merrill, 'less they happens to be lead-coated, but seein' 'at it was Merrill's stuff you hadda go an' steal, they ain't nothin' for it but to give it back to him."

Rangy's dissertation was interrupted by a low, but mocking, ripple of laughter. Coincidentally Miss Dick spurred her cayuse forward for a few rapid strides, until she led the way, with Rangy Pete some paces behind, then she slackened to their old pace, but she did not look backward. Even through the moonlight, Rangy could be quite sure that the ripple of laughter had grown in its dimensions, and that there was something in the situation which had a strongly humorous appeal to Miss Dick.

Through the traveling of some paces, Rangy wondered just where was the foundation for humor; then abruptly, from a sidling fling of the girl's head, he knew. Miss Dick did not believe him. She did not credit the seriousness of his intentions, so far as that ten thousand dollars were concerned. She regarded it simply as a crude attempt to get possession of the spoils. Because of the iron teaching of the butte land, she was incapable, perhaps, of appreciating that man could do the thing which he had planned to do.

For a time, the pity of that seemed to rob the moonlight of some of its glory. But it did not rob Miss Dick of any of her outward appeal. As she rode on now through the brilliant patches and through the deep shadows, a light, careless air of brigandage came to her lips. She hummed it with the free spirit of one without care, and to Rangy Pete, riding in the background, it seemed that for the

time being she had forgotten all about him and his problem.

The pity of it! For Miss Dick, under other conditions, could have been one of the desires of the world. He was conscious of the free, youthful grace, the abandon of her, as she rode on ahead, singing a song of the piracy of the hills, scorning the conventions of man, and mocking the good within him as being nothing but a tawdry strain.

Though the girl's voice was low, it came to him clearly through the night air, with a taunting texture in its notes, with laughter almost at the surface of the words. There was a poise to her head, he could see, which was more mocking even than the laughter; but there was nothing about Miss Dick which robbed her of any of the appeal of her moonlit beauty — curse her! A wonderfully young and virile thing, humanly appealing, alluring, yet accursed with the sin of the butte lands — drawing him away, inch by inch, from the strength of his purpose. He had been right, days ago, when he had told himself that within her fair and appealing body there was a vampirish soul created for man's destruction — no, he would not have it so — she was not luring him away from his purpose; she was goading him on to do his duty.

Rangy Pete spurred his cayuse almost angrily, and he rode up beside the girl. She glanced at him carelessly, but the lilt of song did not drop from her lips.

Something prompted Rangy to wait until long after the song was finished, so that in the end it was the girl who spoke first.

"I am half inclined to take you to the gold, to show it to you, and then see what happens," she declared suddenly, with an air which hinted at strange possibilities for the future, with a definite sporting spirit which implied that the incident could not be without its human interest. To her, it would be a game.

"Mabbe you don't like the Dervishers, er perhaps you got a big spite against them," Rangy returned easily.

"There are some I could see rubbed out," the girl returned, as she caught the meaning of his taunt; then abruptly her thoughts seemed to drift away.

"If they's to be a reception party, I would'n advise you none to have any friends among them present," Rangy interrupted Miss Dick's mood. "This's just a li'l tip I'm handin' to you, Miss, so any time you wants to run on ahead and kinda herd yore friends outa the way, you just let me know."

Miss Dick glanced at him sharply, with a flash in her eyes, but Rangy Pete could see that there was irresolution upon her features which she tried to conceal, but which for the moment was the most compelling phase of her.

So she was still wavering. She could not understand him, Rangy Pete, than whom, in his own

esteem, there was no easier person in the whole world to understand. His life, as he viewed it now, had been simple and direct, in its loves as well as in its hates, in its words as well as in its acts. While hers? God only knew what strange weavings of complexities the iron of the buttes and the teachings of brigandage had builded into her.

Still, it did seem to be his place to help her to understand.

"Miss Dick," he resumed, "they shore looks to be some big thoughts a troublin' themselves in that head of yores, so I'm gonna tell you one or two things what mabbe'll help you to get a rope on them unruly ideas. What I want you to know is that when I say I'm gonna do a thing, I do it. I allus say what I mean, near's I can find the words to say it; an' the worst little thought you got in yore head at this minute is the one that mabbe I'm tryin' to put somethin' over you about that ten thousand. Miss Dick, you can take it from me, I wouldn't touch that ten thousand with a hundred foot lariat if I had'n come to see that it's just as much my job to get that money back as it is to take you in to Triple Butte. I'm thankin' you, Miss, for remindin' me about the ten thousand. Mabbe it ain't easy for a bandit to understand, Miss, but I'm wantin' you to know that I ain't had enough trainin' to be able to look in more'n one direction at once, an' they ain't room in my head for more'n one big idea at

a time. When you get that rounded up, mabbe you'll see that the only thing for you to do is to show me that ten thousand, an' then come back to Triple Butte peaceable like."

Again Miss Dick looked at Rangy Pete, and she studied his face calmly through the moonlight. This time there was no suggestion of laughter or mockery in her manner. There was, instead, a demand to know the truth. But back of her eagerness to understand, Rangy was conscious of the working of some inbred vein of suspicion. That, of course, was the result of her life among the Dervishers. For the moment, as he thought of that, a touch of pity came to his eyes. Pity in his eyes — a sharp flash of anger upon the face of the girl.

Promptly Miss Dick spurred her cayuse forward, and she raced on through the alternate light and shadow of the butte land. The quick, impetuous mood of her!

So she had given him her answer. She would not ride back to Triple Butte in peace. It was for him now to follow her, to camp upon her trail through the long days and nights, to come up with her again sometime in the future; and then, when he found her, to teach to her that code of mankind.

Rangy rode silently through the night, with the problem upon him, and with a strange and new gnawing of pain about the heart. It was queer how the magic and the charm should have fled from the

mellowness of the moonlight. It was strange how these buttes should become nothing but drab sentinels peering into the night; and it was stranger still how the thought of Miss Dick, the bandit, should bring to his brain the keen thrill of promise and the deep torment of despair, like the flashing and vanishing of some ultimate prize before the eyes.

Through the night he rode, with the pangs and the promise of the future in constant conflict within him; and then, when a vague restlessness among the shadings of the eastern sky warned him of brilliant sunrise, he came to a dividing point in the trail.

One draw angled to the north, the other to the south, towards the Pass which marked the last barrier of the Dervishers before one came to that tangle of hills and valleys beyond. Rangy dismounted and studied the trail carefully.

A moment later he shook his head in a worried way at the burnt-yellow cayuse. Miss Dick, by turning to the north, would have avoided all those stray riders who had been strung out through the butte land for days now in search for Dervishers. She would have avoided all those Snaky Y punchers who had gone south the night before in search for him. To the north lay freedom, unhampered and untrammelled.

To the south lay the full menace which the butte land could draw unto itself. To the south lay the

clearer, untangled trails, where man, caught between the impassable barriers of the cliffs, would be trapped helplessly and hopelessly between whatever forces chose to press upon him. And Miss Dick had turned to the south!

The strange, unreadable whim of her! For the girl must have known that those southern trails, being closer to Triple Butte than was this northern pass, must already be peopled with the stray posses from the Snaky Y and with the venom of their purpose.

Rangy Pete's brow grew furrowed as he looked into the south through the growing sunlight, and as he thought of the dangers which lay along the trail which Miss Dick had taken, dangers for her and for him.

Then he shaded his eyes and peered back along the draw he had just ridden. Back there, thrown up clearly against the sharpening rays of the sun, were the jagged rock and the rugged outline of crude cliffs. Back there the trail rose and fell — and yes! Back along that sun-splayed draw there were tiny black shadows crawling along through the morning light. Black shadows which wove and twisted their way among the boulders, shadows which toiled, and which, even as he looked, drew slowly towards him.

Again the furrow came to Rangy's brow, and the swift glance which he swept over the butte land was one almost of angered protest.

Behind him was the posse which had dogged him all through the previous day. In it would be Dan Merrill, smarting under the many lashes which had scourged him of late, but smarting most of all because of the loss of ten thousand dollars in gold.

In Merrill's heart there would be but the one burning purpose of revenge; and at Merrill's back there were a score at least of those creeping black shadows which in time would turn into men keen to do the other's bidding. To the north lay freedom, undoubted and undisputed.

To the south, here at his very feet, was the mouth of that draw which was the neck of a bottle pointing towards the trap of the butte lands. Miss Dick had ridden into it, calmly and uncaring.

As for himself? Again that burning about the heart, that cry of pity in his brain, that demand that he see once more the blue well of light which shone down into her unreadable soul.

With a gesture of impatience, Rangy Pete slapped the astonished cayuse with his sombrero and he rode swiftly and surely down the storm-tossed trail to the south, into the vast and vague hours of the unknown future. For off there, in the uncharted spaces of time and place, the call of the bandit girl was luring him.

CHAPTER XII

INTO the neck of the bottle which was the trap of the butte lands rode Rangy Pete, conscious as he rode of the net which must be weaving about him. To the north, that way lay freedom, with the open trails ahead. To the south, somewhere along this trail he was now threading, or in the Pelican draw, or in the draws beyond, there must be the keen riders of the Snaky Y, spurred on by the savagery of Dan Merrill.

In the whole logical summary of events, there could be nothing less. He, to all practical purposes, was the bandit who had stolen that ten thousand dollars in gold, and he, being now an outcast, would be the just victim of any rider from the Snaky Y. And, unless Merrill were utterly devoid of reason, these draws to the south, leading through to the Pass and to the land of the Dervishers, must have been blocked hours ago — yet behind him, to the north, lay freedom.

After that one swift decision, Rangy gave those trails to the north barely a thought; for it was the lure of Miss Dick, the bandit, which was dragging him on, the lure and the consciousness that the dangers into which he was riding so confidently could be no less vital and poignant to her.

Through the day he rode, over the tumble of hills and valley, past the pyramids of gray rocks and the sentinels of turret tips, climbing slowly but steadily through the un pitying light of the sun which poured its searching rays over the butte land. Slowly that trail climbed upward as it twisted and wound its way about the pyramids and turrets of rock.

For great stretches the whole trail, both forward and back, was lost completely to view; at times it hid behind the turrets of the buttes; again it lay within their shadow, but always, whenever the clear stretches of world lay behind him, he could see those crawling black shadows which seemed to grow larger with the passing of the hours.

"They're gaining, boy!" Rangy informed the uncaring cayuse. "You've had a bit too much work to do these past days."

With that consciousness upon him, and the full knowledge of its significance, Rangy Pete kept his mind upon the future and his eyes upon the trail before him. For off there Miss Dick must eventually ride into the ranks of the punchers, unless, perchance, she really knew what she was doing after all.

Through some minutes that thought startled him. Could it be possible that the girl was riding to the rendezvous of the Dervishers somewhere to the east of the Pass, and that in their numbers she would find safety? For a time that startled him; then it

soothed; then it brought fresh anxiety. For Miss Dick, among the Dervishers, would be lost to him more completely than as though the butte lands had swallowed her up.

With this anxiety upon him, Rangy watched sharply the dun spaces of the forward trail; and because of that he made his discovery, in the advance of the afternoon when the rays of the sun were already slanting and were biting with duller tongue. It was simply some dark object lying in the center of the trail. Rangy checked the cayuse suddenly. A gauntlet lying there before him! A gauntlet fringed at the edge, and therefore some woman's toy! And to whom could it belong other than Miss Dick? But why should the girl's glove be here in the middle of the trail?

Rangy dismounted and picked up the gauntlet; and the feel of it brought a grin to his lips. It would be a memento, to return to her some time, in the near or far-off future. It would —

Rangy's fingers contracted in astonishment. for between their tips was some hard, metallic substance, caught within the folds of the gauntlet. Swiftly he shook that object loose, and instantly an expression of amusement flashed over his features, for that metallic substance was nothing less than a gold coin. Part of Merrill's ten thousand, of course! But what should it be doing here?

Rangy's eyes roved quickly about the tumbled

landscape before him, but within the limit of their gaze there was nothing but the drab, sun-baked walls of the cliffs and this jumble of rock which littered the trail.

But no! There was more than that. There was this scarred face of the trail where the hoofs of many horses had flayed it. Miss Dick had been held up! That was plain now to an intelligence trained to reading the significance of small things. Held up, by punchers or by her own Dervishers? It was no more than he had feared; yet now, with its surety upon him, a sudden flush of anger mottled his cheeks. Anger towards any person who dared to challenge the pathway of Miss Dick!

For a time Rangy walked about the rock-strewn trail, and this action eased the fever of his brain until he was able to laugh at his own folly. Then he returned to the burnt-yellow cayuse and resumed the trail, more slowly, more cautiously than before.

That glove, he could see now through his saner moments, might mean any one of many things. It might be a taunt. It might be a warning; it might be a cry for help.

Towards the waning of the afternoon he came to the divide where this trail ran into the Pelican draw. From that time forward he moved more swiftly. The Pelican, he feared, must be peopled with many riders, and now the urge was upon him to see who were those riders with Miss Dick, and to learn if

that message of the gauntlet were an appeal or a taunt.

For an hour he rode thus, until in time the whole world about him began to change, until the barrenness of the buttes gave way grudgingly to a stunted tree growth which seemed to spring out of the bare face of the rock itself. As he rode he climbed ever higher, until at length he rounded a sharp rock in the draw, and there he pulled the cayuse to its haunches with a startled jerk at the reins.

"Gosh A'mighty!" he exclaimed. "You shore been doing good work, yellow boy."

For there, in front of him, toiling up the opposite slope, were four riders. There could be no doubt that one of them was Miss Dick. Riding away from him, towards the Pass! That, according to the writing of the plains, could mean but the one thing — that those three strange riders were Dervishers, and that the girl, in riding into the trap of the butte lands, had ridden with intent and in full knowledge of her motives.

Rangy became more than ever convinced of that as the minutes dragged away into an hour, and as those four riders continued their steady tramp towards the retreat beyond the Pass. Through that hour he trailed them, though circumstances compelled him to keep such a discreet distance between them that he was able to read but little meaning into their actions, other than that they were Dervishers

making their way into the safety zone of those forested hills which lay beyond the rim of the buttes.

During that hour he came to the juncture of the Pelican and the Arrowhead trails. The latter draw was a narrow one, ambling in from the direction of the Double K and the Triangle O ranches, and like so many of its brethren it linked up with the Pelican on this main route through to the Pass. But the Arrowhead, Rangy Pete knew, was the last of those converging trails which bore down upon this one cut through the southern buttes, so that a man caught between this juncture point and the Pass would become the easy victim of those who had trapped him. There was a price which could be taken, of course; but in this moment of crisis, with the lure of Miss Dick upon him, there was nothing in the price of battle which could equal one glimpse of her oval cheeks. Yet was it a trap after all?

The calm and confident manner in which those four Dervishers made their unhurried way towards the Pass, would seem to indicate that they had but little to fear. Could it be possible that the posses of the Snaky Y and of Triple Butte had not yet reached this point, and that accordingly the route was clear all the way through to the forests beyond? The attitude of those four Dervishers would imply that. Still, the northern trail which he and Miss Dick had taken from Ike Collander's store was miles farther than the direct journey to Triple Butte, and

unless Merrill's brain really had been befuddled by the fumes of anger, this trail should have been blocked hours ago.

Rangy dismounted, and with much effort he climbed to an elevated point upon the cliffs from where he could get a vista of the trails behind him. The draw he had just ridden was clear of men or of horses, but Rangy knew there was nothing in that but false security. There were so many sharp dips and sudden valleys and queer turnings that a thousand men might well be hidden within the range of his eye.

But the Arrowhead trail at the right, ambling listlessly into the Pelican! It stretched out cleaner and less tangled before his gaze, so that from this elevated position he could see its course through long stretches of sun-burned trail. For minutes he studied those open areas, with hands shading his eyes, and with his trained gaze studying even the smaller shadows. In the end he uttered an exclamation which was partly approval and partly incomprehension.

"Shore," he informed himself, "there's another whole flock of riders coming in the Arrowhead, miles back! But what I can't understand is why they weren't here long ago."

Apparently, so far as he could now judge, he was ahead of the pursuing posses. Some strange whim of fate had delayed them. But it did not matter now.

The only thing which counted was the fact that chance had brought him safety, and that Miss Dick was off there just a short distance before him; and he felt that if he played the game cautiously, he might get a glimpse of her face once more, in spite of that surrounding bodyguard of Dervishers. At the worst, he could follow them into the land beyond the buttes.

When Rangy mounted once more he rode swiftly, so that a few minutes later, when he rounded a curve in the draw, he was obliged to jerk the burnt-yellow cayuse to a slithering halt. For the four Dervishers, in the calmness of their characteristic presumption, had dismounted, and were apparently getting ready for a meal and a rest. From the shelter of a rock, Rangy studied the situation before him.

The Dervishers had chosen their position well. With a clear stretch of the valley before them, they could see across a long strip of the Pelican draw which they had just traveled, and accordingly would be well warned of the approach of any of those pursuing parties. But doubtless this halt had been chosen because of some queer streak of innate daring; perhaps it was to draw the pursuit in the direction in which they would have it go; but whatever might be the strange whim of the Dervishers, there was another thing which brought greater torment to Rangy Pete. It was the demand that he should see again the girl who had mocked him.

Perhaps chance would show him the way to whisper a few words to tell her that he would never give her up; perhaps even he might steal her from the shelter of those attending riders.

With the thrill of that thought upon him, Rangy studied carefully the formation of the rock of the buttes. A moment later he gave a little exclamation of content. For if he knew anything about butte conformation, the twisting of this trail meant that the draw must almost double back upon itself at a point just a few yards beyond that sentinel tip where the four Dervishers had taken up their stand.

Rangy laughed to himself softly. It would be possible for him to climb the cliffs, cross the top of the ledge, and swing down into the Pelican draw at a point past the position of the Dervishers. If he could not approach them from the front, across this open valley, he could at least come upon them from their unguarded side, and if, perchance, Miss Dick —

Rangy worked swiftly as he discarded unnecessary equipment — carrying as weapons only his pair of six-guns and an extra belt of cartridges — and as he climbed the shelving face of the draw. Fifteen minutes of labor put him at the top, from which point he could look across the thin ridge; and the first glance told him that he had been right, that the trail doubled back upon itself. A quarter of an hour later he was across the ridge, and was looking

down upon the draw at a strategic position between the Dervishers and the Pass.

Slowly, with infinite care, Rangy began the descent. It was difficult, more difficult than the climb had been, so that a full half hour had slipped away before he once more stood in the rocky trail of the draw.

The need for haste was upon him now. There had been much lost time, so much that at any minute those four riders might round the corner of the trail. In this instant, with the whole future hanging upon the margin of seconds, Rangy began to appreciate the folly of his undertaking. He was here, cut off, horseless, between the Dervishers and their haunts, with nothing left to him but a pair of derringers and his natural wiles.

He must hurry now. He counted the seconds as he ran. Doubtless they would come upon him abruptly, just as he reached that corner of the trail, perhaps before. Perhaps those Dervishers would catch him here in the open of the draw!

Rangy ran until he found that his breath was coming in quick, stabbing jerks. This would never do. It left his hand unsteady. So, deliberately, with a grip of his will, he slackened his pace; but his eyes never strayed from that turn in the draw around which the drab noses of the Dervisher cayuses might be poked at any second.

A hundred paces now! Fifty! There was the rock before him, with the sharp twist in the trail.

Rangy's breath came firmer, and his hand gained its old, iron calm. He threw his sombrero aside, and he peered around the face of the rock. Then a great sigh slipped from his lips.

That party of four were not even preparing for the trail. There they were, directly in front of him, a hundred yards or more away. Their backs were towards him, and they seemed to be studying the distant slopes of the draw along which they had so recently journeyed. They were watching, doubtless, for the advancing armies of Triple Butte, waiting to taunt them even as the girl had so lately taunted him.

Rangy abruptly found that his fingers were clenching savagely along the butt of his six-gun.

"Jumping mavericks!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "There's something wrong."

Even at a hundred yards distant, Miss Dick's position had seemed at first glance to be too rigid to be natural; but now? — he was quite sure of it. Her hands were tied behind her back, and she was tugging slightly at her bonds. Or was she rubbing the rope steadily against the rock? The girl's sombrero was gone. The back of her head was towards him, and he could see that little wisps of her corn-silk hair had escaped from their bonds and were floating about her head like a halo.

The three men were in front of her, with their backs towards her; and now, when one of them

glanced about, the girl stopped that rubbing movement of her hands. Words passed. What they were, Rangy could not say; then when the man turned his face away, to study the trail once more, the girl resumed that chafing movement of the rope against the rock.

In that instant, the flash of a new thought came to Rangy Pete. Could it be possible that the Der-vishers had heard of his meeting with Miss Dick at The Craggs? Were they punishing her for that; and if so, would it not be for himself they were watching that back trail so patiently? Again Rangy laughed to himself, with low, cautious elation.

Then the man who had spoken to Miss Dick tossed aside his sombrero, and he shaded his eyes to peer into the east. To Rangy Pete, the silhouette of the man's back, unhatted as he was, seemed somehow vaguely familiar. But he could not place the figure in his memory. Doubtless it would be the same man he had seen in the doorway of Tony Burke's saloon but a few days ago; it would be one of those men who had swaggered — then the man turned again to speak to Miss Dick, and again the girl's figure drooped.

"Gawd!" The feverish exclamation slipped from Rangy Pete's lips, and he stood for a time staring in bewilderment.

The man's profile was towards him now. He could see the outline of the features clearly. He

could see the great nose, the sharp chin, the tangled wisp of hair which always fell down over the man's forehead. That wisp of hair, how he hated it. If only he could forget that hatred, for the man's face was not strange to him. Rangy's fingers grew steady, and a firm smile came to his lips.

That man who was leering now at Miss Dick, whose smile was not the smile which any man should use towards a woman, had a face and a figure which were familiar to him. And the man was not a bandit, such as the rangemen defined the word. It was Bill Sonnes. Sonnes, the right-hand man of Dan Merrill, of the Snaky Y. Bill Sonnes, sitting there leering at Miss Dick with an offensive air of possession! Why did he hate the man? Sonnes, who had always been objectionable — Sonnes who had captured Miss Dick, and who threatened to spoil his, Rangy Pete's, plan to teach the bandit girl that there are codes of mankind which must be respected. Sonnes, with a smirk upon his face, leaning now just a trifle towards the girl, negligently, but knowingly. Sonnes, with that ugly big nose and the ragged wisp of hair, smirking, priding himself that he had a way with women — perhaps he did have a way with Shifty Lizz of the Burke saloon — but with this girl, a bandit, whose hands were tied behind her back —

Rangy Pete found that it was with an effort that he kept a grip upon himself. If only he could forget

that he hated the man's big nose. The presumption of Sonnes, to have taken a captive whom he had reserved for himself. For it was plain that Miss Dick was a captive. Even now, with Sonnes' face turned again to the east, the girl was once more chafing the rope against the rock. She wanted her freedom; that was evident.

She had also wanted her freedom from him, and had taken it. But had she regretted it? She had at least thrown that glove upon the trail. In appeal, or warning?

Yet for Miss Dick, what did it matter whether he or Bill Sonnes were her captor? Nothing, except that with Sonnes it would be a crude enforcement of the law; with himself it would be the exemplification of a code.

The two men with Sonnes, with faces turned constantly to the east, were unfamiliar in their pose. Doubtless they would be of the younger clique of the Snaky Y men, perhaps whose mettle had not been tested other than upon the ranges. Tools in the hands of Sonnes, no doubt. Otherwise they would not have held their gaze so steadily upon the east while Sonnes ogled the captive bandit.

Abruptly Rangy found himself vaguely wondering. These three men had captured the girl many miles back along the trail. Why had they ridden farther into the butte land, instead of turning back along the route to Triple Butte? It was that which had

misled him, which had made him believe they were bandits; but now the answer was plain. They were merely waiting for the belated posses to join them.

Miss Dick abruptly stopped the restless movement of her wrists, as Sonnes swung about until his leering lips were within a foot of the girl's face. There was a searing fire burning through Rangy's veins; yet through it he was able to summon a grim smile to his lips.

Sonnes, the fool, smirking at the bandit girl! It would be almost justice, upon Sonnes, if Rangy were to step aside. If only he could loosen those bonds about the girl's wrists, and then leave Sonnes to her mercy. Sonnes, the ogler, who had a way with women — that would be a fine game to watch, Sonnes against Miss Dick — Sonnes at the mercy of the trickster — Sonnes, being warped and twisted, until in the end he did the girl's bidding — Sonnes, the smirking fool!

Again that hot racing of blood through Rangy's veins. Sonnes, with the huge, ugly nose, and that brazen, legible manner!

That distance between them — a hundred yards, dotted here and there with boulders which perhaps would turn aside an angry bullet! A hundred yards, with the backs of four people towards him!

Another warm surge of blood throbbed in his veins as Sonnes elbowed his way in a languid pose towards the girl. For a moment the blood seemed to burn

to his finger-tips, and he found there a strange itching to see if he could shoot that hundred yards and kill Bill Sonnes with a single shot. But that would be the crude way.

Swiftly, with sudden resolution, Rangy slipped his boots aside; he loosened the six-guns in either holster, then he dropped to his knees. Slowly, with elaborate care, he began to crawl towards the shadow of the nearest boulder. This was not in line with the course of the draw. So much the better, for it threw him rather more towards Sonnes' back, and less within his line of vision on those occasions when the man smirked at Miss Dick. A false step, the rattling of a fragment of rock — that would mean battle — battle, three to one, with the girl in the line of his fire. For a moment Rangy hesitated. The undertaking, under such conditions, was folly, utter folly. Folly only in case he made that rattling of a rock, or that misstep.

Slowly he crept forward again. He hugged the ground, dragging his body snakelike along, brushing from his course every pebble which threatened danger. Sonnes in front of him, leering more persistently now, more confidently! More languid and careless, as well, as he leaned intimately towards the girl. How the blood surged in Rangy's veins. Except for those two punchers, whose faces and whose reputations were unknown, it would be much simpler to end it all with one swift shot.

Ninety yards now, with the first boulder in front of him. He could make it with a single shot — Miss Dick working more feverishly at those lashings when Sonnes' face was turned out towards the east. Afraid, was she? Alarmed at the persistent ogling of Bill Sonnes, at that slow, insinuating manner with which he was bridging the distance between them, almost imperceptibly, meaningly.

Twenty-five yards to the next boulder, a larger one where he could rest a little from this snakelike position of his limbs, a boulder which threw him still more behind Sonnes' back.

Rangy crept forward again. This time, for the half of the distance, Sonnes' gaze was studying the east, and the girl's hands worked with steady insistence. He could see harder lines upon her face when she glanced down for an instant in a vain effort to discover what progress she had made; and for the balance of the distance, while Sonnes watched her insolently, Rangy could see the contempt in the girl's poise.

Rangy reached the boulder, and peered out eagerly. From this position it should be easier now. He was almost at Sonnes' back, even when the man turned towards the girl. But there was danger, he felt, in that instinctive sense of alarm which warns all animals, man and beast alike, a latent sense which might carry its message to Bill Sonnes.

There was the possibility that Miss Dick might

glance around in those moments when Sonnes' face was turned away, and that she might see him. Once or twice already she had turned her head, feverishly, hurriedly, in an effort to look at those lashed bonds, but she had not raised her eyes. Should she raise her eyes now as he crawled forward, he would be directly in her line of vision. What then?

Again Rangy crawled forward. He must take his chance that Miss Dick would prefer him as a captor rather than Sonnes.

Steadily, with patient persistence, with sounds so slight that he scarcely heard his own movements, Rangy Pete crawled forward, from boulder to boulder, and still Sonnes continued to bask in the girl's presence. Still the backs of the well trained punchers remained turned towards Sonnes and his quarry, and now that Rangy had drawn so close, he could see that there was a gap of a good ten yards between Sonnes and the others.

Twenty-five yards distant now!

A shot in the back? No! In the past few minutes, he had grown to hate Sonnes too much for that. He had grown to hate the man's reptilian manner, that nameless something which showed in his whole pose. A shot in the back would not be enough for Bill Sonnes.

A steady look in the eye would be much better — a steady look which would warn Sonnes of the inevitable call of Death, a look which would give to

him at least one moment of terror of the future. To die suddenly would not be enough for the man whose manner could insinuate such things to a girl with hands lashed behind her back. He had earned, as well, a period of horror through which he must contemplate the surety of Death.

The thought of that left Rangy's fingers itching still more. Miss Dick turned her face aside, and there was hatred, and some terror, in her pose. He could see that now; just twenty yards away.

He must look into Bill Sonnes' eyes first, before the battle came. And yet there were two punchers just ten yards beyond Bill Sonnes.

Rangy crawled forward with still greater caution. It would not be a sound now which would warn Sonnes. It would be a message of that hatred which was burning in his heart.

Twenty yards more. Miss Dick turned suddenly. The message of a presence had reached her. She glanced up, and her eyes met his. For the merest fraction of time it seemed that the girl's eyes were puzzled; then a swift change swept over them, whose meaning Rangy could not read. She turned her face away just in time to meet Bill Sonnes' glance.

She met the man's glance fairly, and for the first time since Rangy had watched them, Miss Dick made some faint response to Sonnes' advances. She leaned towards him just a little, and when the man stretched forward more eagerly than he had yet done, the

movement threw his back still more towards Rangy Pete. In Rangy's heart there was a strange thrill of admiration for the girl's quick wit, mixed with a deeper conviction of hatred for the man Sonnes.

If only the girl would continue to play the part she had suddenly chosen, he would still look Death into the man's eyes.

Rangy pulled his body forward with barely more sound than was made by the passing breath of air. Looking across the shoulder of the man Sonnes, he could see into the girl's face. She, in turn, was looking at Sonnes, and even as Rangy watched, he could see the suggestion of an encouraging smile creeping into her eyes. Playing her part, admirably, cleverly. Sonnes reached out his arms, and still the smile lingered about Miss Dick's eyes. He must hurry now, if he were to save the girl from the disgrace of Bill Sonnes' arms.

Ten yards now, eight, five. He dare not risk more, for even as he pulled himself into a sitting posture, Sonnes' arms were closing about the girl. Beyond him, the two punchers still sat like statuettes, careless of the scene behind them.

Three to one! A smile came to Rangy Pete's heart, though his lips were straight and firm as he lay one six-gun across the curve of his hip. Then he tapped lightly upon the rock with the knuckles of his left hand. Still Sonnes did not heed, the crudeness of his senses being wrapped up in a contemplation of

what this sudden yielding of Miss Dick might mean to him.

Rangy tapped more loudly. The faint sound carried through the short space and it reached Sonnes' brain. His unclosed arms dropped swiftly from about the girl, his body jerked back a foot or two, and he shot one swift glance across his shoulder.

As his eyes met the stern glance of Rangy Pete, they held there for a swift moment of astonishment. Then the astonishment vanished, and there came a quick realization of the position in which he found himself.

Five yards away was Rangy Pete, looking into his eyes that cold, unmistakable message, which meant the ending of all feuds, the ending of life and of all things else — for one of the two.

The end of all things for one of them! And Rangy Pete held over him that thin edge of advantage which may mean life or death when desperate men face each other across the cold muzzles of weapons.

Yet only ten yards away were two men. One word of warning, just the lifting of his voice, and those two men would be here, fighting at his side. But Bill Sonnes knew the futility of that one word of warning. Rangy Pete's eyes told him that. They told him that no matter what the world might hold for the rest of mankind, it held nothing for him but this short moment of terror through which he must contemplate the cold approach of Death — Death,

stealing upon him, looking into his face from the eyes of Rangy Pete, a cold, merciless death, just as cold and unscrupulous as he had felt a moment ago towards the girl at his side. She had been his prey. And now — God in Heaven, but he knew the game of Rangy Pete!

One word, the faintest sound of warning, and Rangy would shoot him down coldly. But he knew it was not for that word of warning that Rangy was waiting. It was for that instinctive jerk of Sonnes' fingers which would tell him that an enemy was reaching for his gun.

There before him sat Rangy Pete, with the horror of a blank future in his eyes. His gun was not in sight, but Sonnes felt that it could not be far from that right hand which dangled so carelessly at his side. Rangy Pete was a fool, even to take his hand from his gun. That was not what *he* would have done. He would not have sat thus, torturing another with the surety of death.

How his fingers itched to reach for his gun. How his tongue quivered to shriek out a warning. Yet either act meant death. God! Death, with a scurvy past tormenting him already with its memories.

To move! To speak! If only he dared to take his gaze away from Rangy Pete's face. So that was Rangy's game. He knew it now. It was an old game which he himself had tried upon more than one of his victims. It was that old, cruel game of badgering

the other man, until, in desperation, he drew for his weapon. In swift memory, the faces of men leaped before him, men whom he had tortured in just this same way. One of them had been a youth, a mere youth. He could see even now the whiteness which came to that youth's cheeks, the cold sweat of death which leaped to his forehead when first he came to realize Bill Sonnes' purpose. And now he, Sonnes, was staring that same death in the face, in just the same way. God! The torture of it! The horror!

He did not want to die. Life, just a moment ago, had been too keenly athrill with promise. It had been whispering to him strange things, promising him a taste of those joys which he knew must be found somewhere upon the pages of the life of man.

Death, staring him in the face. The joy of stolen fruits, mean, sordid fruits, the joy of their promise — and now — Death staring at him!

If only he dared to reach for his gun, he might beat Rangy to the draw. If only he dared to shout aloud, he might distract Rangy's attention by the confusion of numbers. If only he had the courage to sit still and stare back at Rangy Pete.

Suddenly some of the fear left Sonnes' face, and in its place came cunning. Why had he not thought of the way out before?

"I'll surrender," he whispered in a thin voice which barely reached Rangy Pete.

A look of disgust flashed over Rangy's features.

He was conscious that in this moment the thin margin of advantage had slipped from him. Instinct told him that treachery lurked behind the mild tone of Bill Sonnes; but the code of the plains forbade violence towards a man who yields.

"You pore idiot, what you wanta go and do that for?" he returned in a peevish whisper. "All right. Hands up."

Sonnes began to raise his hands slowly, cautiously, but some thread of sound or some message of Rangy's presence must have been carried to those watchers beyond. For abruptly one of them turned about and glanced curiously over his shoulder. He was a middle-aged man, with features seamed with the life of the plains. For a small fraction of time he stared, then a low exclamation escaped his lips. That sound reached Bill Sonnes. It reached Rangy Pete. It drew, as well, the gaze of a much younger man at his side, a mere youth.

With a quick, darting glance, Rangy's eyes left Sonnes. He knew the folly of that. He knew the trickery of Sonnes. He knew the fatality of events which were sweeping down upon him in swift crisis.

Even as his eyes met those of the older man for an instant, even before they flashed away again, Rangy was conscious that Sonnes' right hand had begun that downward sweep which meant battle.

Instantly Sonnes' voice cut sharply through the silence.

“At him boys! Fast!”

The flash of instinct rushed Rangy Pete into battle. Chance had swept all other choice from him.

Sonnes' fingers were working now with their old swift skill, with the goad of fear in the brain which drove them on. And Rangy felt that he had lost that thin margin of advantage which had been his. There was but the one chance, one chance to do battle against three. And that was his sidelong fling, with its shot from the ground.

Even as Sonnes' gun whipped into sight, Rangy flung his body sideways, to carry him farther from the girl, and as he sprawled at length upon the ground he fired across his hip. At the same instant Sonnes' gun barked, and he felt the whine of the bullet as it cut through the air at the place where his body had been but a second before. Sonnes fired, just the once, then his body sagged sluggishly to one side, and past him, in the open space beyond, Rangy caught sight of the two punchers.

The one, the youth, was staring in amazement. The other, the middle-aged man with the grim face, was drawing his gun, and so swift had been the passage of time that his fingers had not yet reached the butt protruding from the holster.

Rangy fired again, from the ground. The six-gun dropped clattering from the man's hand.

“Put 'em up, Kid,” Rangy spoke crisply. “They's times when it's a heap better to start wavin' towards

yore future home on high than it is to go a clawin' fer a gun. And this is one of them times — that's better, Kid. If you wasn't so young and tender, I might go to shooting you up a bit, but mabbe it ain't yore fault that you been flockin' about with coyotes like Bill Sonnes. Now keep 'em there, Kid, and you'll most mabbe live to tell the youngsters all about how you got held up once by a real bad man."

As Rangy talked, he rose to his feet briskly, crossed over and took possession of all the visible weapons.

"Got any guns hid out on me, gents?" he demanded, and the older man hurried an assurance that they were weaponless.

"Then you ain't learned all you mighta learned from that coyote," Rangy declared. "Youse two gents just herd yoreselves together and don't get frisky while I attends to some other business."

Rangy's other business happened to be a visit to Miss Dick. He stooped over without looking into her face, and cut the lashings from her wrists.

"You'll have to 'skuse me, Miss, for hornin' my way into this little party, but I kinda got the idea that them punchers wasn't being nice to you. If I made a mistake, all you gotta do is show me the door."

"I think you had better stay and look after the men you shot," Miss Dick returned, with an attempt

at calmness which did not entirely conceal her relief at the turn of events. "That person looks as though he was dead."

Rangy crossed over to the tumbled heap which had once been Bill Sonnes, which had looked so daringly at the captive girl. He stooped over, put his hand inside Sonnes' shirt, then faced Miss Dick again.

"They's only one guess, Miss," he spoke humbly, "and you've got it right. Now I'll be looking after this other gent what stepped in front of something hard. Gosh A'mighty! "

The exclamation was due to the action of the youthful puncher who was now running across the narrow strip of trail between them and the cayuses. Almost as Rangy looked, he leaped to the back of one of the animals and began to race towards that sharp rock marking the turn in the trail around which Rangy had so recently stalked them. Rangy stooped, picked up a Winchester from the pile of arms, and followed, on foot.

When he crossed that hundred yards and stood looking into the straight trail beyond, he saw that the youthful rider was a bare hundred yards ahead of him.

Rangy raised the rifle, and through the sights he caught the clear outline of the flying figure. He saw, as well, that the youth turned and looked over his shoulder, and even at that distance he fancied he

could read the wave of fright which suddenly swept over the other's features.

With a sigh, Rangy Pete lowered the rifle and stood looking at the figure flying before him.

Shortly there was a faint noise at his side, and when he swung about quickly he saw Miss Dick looking at him curiously.

"You could have. Why didn't you?" she demanded, in the tone of one who seeks for knowledge.

"Never could hit anything on the move," Rangy evaded.

"Was it because he was so young?" the girl insisted, ignoring the obvious evasion.

"Let's go back and see if any more of them's got the running habit," he evaded for the second time.

"I s'pose we'd soon better be on the move, because Merrill's army ain't so far behind."

The girl followed beside him as he returned to the scene of recent battle, and there they found the middle-aged puncher sitting on the ground trying to bandage his wounded wrist.

"Needin' help, pard?" Rangy asked; then he bent over and assisted the man to rearrange the bandages. When he completed the work, he again found Miss Dick's eyes upon him curiously.

"As I been sayin', Miss, we'd better be slopin'," Rangy made haste to forestall any questioning. "Smithers, you stay here and keep a wake over Bill

Sonnes. You'll skuse me, pard, if I take the liberty of taking yore arsenal along with me. How soon can you be ready, Miss?"

"Where are you taking me?" she asked quietly. "Back to Triple Butte, as you said you would do?"

"Shore. I ain't gonna break no promises. But first of all we gotta be moochin' it out of the way of Dan Merrill's army. He's a curious cuss, that Merrill. He mightn't understand why Bill Sonnes is a lyin' there all crumpled up and why Smithers won't be good for anything for two-three months. He's impetuous like, and apt to be resentful. So, Miss, we'll be joggin' along, soon's you are ready."

"I am ready now," the girl returned quietly.

"Then if you wait till I get Yeller Boy, we'll be ridin' right along." Rangy spoke as he started out.

The yellow cayuse was hidden beyond a bend in the trail, so it was quite possible, he appreciated, that when he returned, Miss Dick might once more be making a natural move in search for freedom. He had played fair with her. He had told her of his unaltered purpose. He had given her a chance to escape.

Yet when again he caught a glimpse of the recent scene of struggle, he knew that Miss Dick had not taken advantage of his absence. By the time he reached camp, she was mounted upon her cayuse and was waiting somewhat impatiently to make a start.

"We'll be following the little boy cow-puncher to see that he don't get into no danger," Rangy tried to speak lightly though he was conscious of a strain. "Look after things, Smithers, till we get back."

Side by side they rounded the sharp rock in the trail which led onward to the Pass, and the moment they were beyond sight of the back trail, Miss Dick asked:

"You say there is a Merrill army behind us?"

"They shore is. A big one. Must be most nigh fifty riders, not more'n two hours back of us —"

Rangy found himself interrupted by a low ripple of laughter, laughter without merriment.

"What's troublin' you, girl?"

"Nothing, except that there is a Merrill army in front of us as well. That is where that boy rider has gone."

"Gosh A'mighty," Rangy exclaimed. "You sure of that?"

Miss Dick nodded, and in the quick jerk of her head Rangy recognized a sudden consciousness of power.

"How far in front of us?" he asked slowly, aware that in the mere asking he lost some of his pose of self-reliance. "Which way are they riding?"

"Four or five miles. It isn't more than that to the Pass," Miss Dick returned, and the strange lights in her eyes had abruptly become an acknowl-

edgment of Rangy's dependence upon her knowledge. "I expect they're hiding somewhere around the Pass, if they haven't found out already that the Dervishers all got through last night. If they've found that out, that boy cow-puncher will probably meet some of them coming back — "

Miss Dick paused abruptly, and the sidelong glance of her eyes, the queer little twist to her lips, were a challenge to his boast of efficiency. For a brief space she watched him, and as Rangy Pete did not take up the unfinished sentence, she put that challenge into words.

"They have us trapped on both sides. How are you going to get us out, Mr. Rangy Pete?"

There was the barest suggestion of lingering over the word *us*; yet that, he felt quite sure, was nothing but mockery. But there was an appealing something in her manner of which he could not be quite so certain.

Still, he could not answer the girl's question, for she had stated obvious truths. He *knew* there was an army behind. She *said* there was an army in front. The only other way of escape was over the face of the buttes; and in his brief climb of some minutes ago he had learned the futility of attempting to escape over the top of the world. That in the end must mean death, slow death from thirst and starvation. If it were possible to take cayuses along, there might be a hope; but to climb those buttes

alone, to face the cold of the nights, the blistering heat of the days, to stumble on and on, knowing not the way, waiting only for death —

Rangy Pete shook his head suddenly.

“Then tell me why you rescued me from that horrible puncher you called Sonnes,” Miss Dick spoke more crisply.

For the barest fraction of a minute, as Rangy’s gaze wandered over the features of the girl before him, as he noticed again the shimmer of her hair, the firm, full lines of her features, as he studied for an instant the deep blue of her eyes, there flashed into his mind a thought which in the past few hours had not been a stranger to him — that Miss Dick, under other conditions, must really be one of the greatest prizes which earth could give to man. He knew that for an instant that thought softened the lines of his features which he had hoped to keep firm; so he answered quickly, lightly —

“You shore didn’t think I’d let Bill Sonnes take you back to Triple Butte, when I’d promised to take you.”

“That is the only reason, so you could keep that foolish promise of yours?”

“Certain,” Rangy nodded deliberately.

“You lie. Now how are you going to get me out of this?”

Miss Dick spoke impatiently, but for some strange reason which Rangy did not stop to analyze, her

abrupt violence of tongue brought to him a memory of that old thrill which had once warmed the blood of him in her presence. She *knew* that there had been something personal in that rescue, that he was not merely the machine — Gad, but he was merely a machine, trying to teach to her —

“I asked you how you are going to get me out of this,” the voice insisted at his side.

“Seeing that I’m dead certain they’s a big enough army behind us to gobble us up, we’ll be movin’ on ahead. Come along.”

Miss Dick responded with alacrity. She urged her cayuse forward, and a minute later they were cantering briskly along the butte land draw. Unconsciously, as though born to the ranks of those who rule, the girl took the lead. Rangy was content that she should do so. For that permitted him to watch the shimmer of her hair, the quick little fling of her shoulders, the arrogant poise of her head, the lithe-ness of her figure, and the hundred and one other things about her which made up that attractiveness of which before he had been but vaguely conscious. Now, he was more than conscious of it. There was an intensity to that consciousness which brought a feeling of constriction about his heart, a slight burning in his veins, a racing of his blood, which made him suddenly glad that Bill Sonnes’ arms had not closed about her. There was a smothering sensation in his breast, which left a slight haze in

his brain. But that would be the result of his persistent efforts through two days and a night. Surely bodily weakness was not seizing him now, at the moment when most he needed strength. Still, that tightening of the chest, that smothering feeling did not leave him — if anything it grew more acute when he caught the strange, challenging lights in Miss Dick's eyes as she glanced at him from time to time over her shoulder. There was something queer in the girl's eyes. Could it be possible that she, too, was breaking down under the strain of their long activity? Queer that he had not thought of that before. For her activity had been as prolonged as his. Strange lights in Miss Dick's eyes! Smiling even, to herself. Yes, they were both breaking down under the strain. Beautiful, even, when the slanting rays of the sun played upon her in this manner. Yes, he was glad now that he had shot Bill Sonnes. That had been an evil leer upon Sonnes' lips; that had been an evil thought which stretched out the man's arms in embrace. How Rangy's blood raced warmly as he thought of that. Of course it would be mountain fever which had taken a grip of him. Was it that fever which made him fancy that the girl's eyes were shining when she looked back at him, or was it the way the gleam of the sun-rays caught them? How bronzed were the girl's arms; how perfectly she sat the saddle. That did not speak of weariness.

"Have you quite decided where you are going to take me?" Miss Dick's voice brought him back to an abrupt consciousness that there was a problem before him. Strange; but for a moment he had quite forgotten it.

"We will have to take a chance that no one catches us before dark. Shorely we'll be able to slip by them in the night."

"It will be moonlight," the girl called back, as she urged her cayuse forward.

It would be moonlight, with the shimmering moonlight of the butte lands which would search out every nook and cranny, which would close every avenue of escape unless chance should play a part. Rangy was beginning to appreciate his helplessness in the face of circumstances, when the girl spoke again.

"Besides, they will be after you long before dark. At the most, you have the time it will take a man to ride four miles and back again."

Rangy did not answer. Escape, for a man alone, *might* be possible. He shook his head doggedly, almost angrily, at the dun walls of the buttes which stood up cold and impassive, careless of the problems of man, indifferent to his future, but holding him nevertheless to this narrow pathway along which the punchers must shortly ride.

"Have you anything to suggest?" the girl demanded, with another backward glance over her shoulder.

The girl's eyes were sparkling. Almost, he fancied, there was delight in their depths, delight in his inefficiency in this emergency.

"I got a couple of six-guns and a Winchester," he returned.

"Silly," the girl laughed. "Is that all?"

"It's good for a half dozen of them Merrill riders."

"Don't boast, for they would bury you before morning, if they bothered to bury you at all. Is that all?"

"Somethin's bound to turn up," Rangy replied, though conscious of the girl's increasing delight.

"Then you admit you are stumped?" Miss Dick insisted. "Yet, if I were alone, the matter for me would be simple —"

Rangy jerked the burnt-yellow cayuse to a sliding stop.

"They ain't nothin' like considerin' yoreself alone, Miss. If you know a way to get outa this mess, I'll shore be turnin' my back."

Miss Dick's cayuse stopped some ten paces beyond him.

"I wasn't saying that I wanted to be alone," she laughed softly. "I was just hinting that sometimes when a man falls down, perhaps a woman could find the way through."

"Well?" Rangy questioned, and he began to wonder if it would be objectionable after all to be

dependent upon this girl, whose soul had been nurtured by the iron of the buttes, but whose eyes were now dazzling with the lights of merriment.

"I owe you a debt. Perhaps I can cancel it. You saved me from — from Sonnes. If I save you from the wrath of Sonnes' friends, the debt will be cancelled, perhaps?"

"That debt? You ask no more?"

"More? What more is there that I could ask?" The wonderment in the girl's manner was confusing to Rangy's self-esteem. There was this manner in which he was dogging her steps, there was his promise to teach to her the code of mankind; and yet she had not asked that he forego them.

"What more could I ask?" the girl pressed.

"I kinda thought mabbe you might want me to lay off taking you back to Triple Butte."

"Oh," the girl exclaimed softly, "but I could not ask that. It has been too amusing. You agree to the other? There is but little time to lose."

Rangy Pete nodded, for the abrupt shock of his vanity did not encourage speech.

A moment later they were galloping side by side along the draw, and this time Rangy Pete, though still conscious of the girl's charms, fought off the sentiment of her presence. For he, the self-reliant Rangy Pete, had become dependent upon a mere girl, perhaps even for his whole future. He tried to turn his eyes away, but found that they strayed

constantly towards her; he tried to focus his mind upon the peril of the future, but that only drew him back to wonder about this plan which lay in the girl's brain; he tried to drive her from his thoughts, and in attempting that, he but found himself caught more hopelessly in a wild tangle of thought of which Miss Dick was the background. He noticed now how confident she had become, how masterful, and yet, back of that, there was still that gleam of amusement in her eyes whenever she looked towards him. There was amusement, an impersonal thing, as though life were at last holding out some of the fruits of reward.

How long he rode thus, studying the girl at his side, wondering at the quick, flashing moods which controlled her, Rangy Pete could not say. He knew only that she swept him back to the present with a quick gesture.

"I told you there wasn't much time to spare," she exclaimed, with a little touch of excitement in her voice, as she pointed to a ridge in the butte land trail before them.

There, through a gap in the buttes, was a clear vision of the trail beyond. It stood out clear-cut before him, perhaps a mile distant, perhaps a half mile. But more important than the distance was the fact that a string of riders were racing down towards them.

Miss Dick rode on, with Rangy at her side, and

in a minute more the vision of the distant trail was lost to view.

"The boy puncher didn't lose much time," the girl exclaimed. "He must have found the Merrill gang riding this way. Can you get a little more speed out of that cayuse, Mr. Pete?"

Rangy Pete did. He used the spur on the burnt-yellow cayuse, keeping at Miss Dick's side only with an effort, and wondering all the time at the meaning of this strange ride into the arms of the enemy. He had seen the enemy through the gap in the buttes, and this pace must bring them together; and what then? It was a strange rescue which Miss Dick was conducting, and yet, except for a slight heightening of the color in her cheeks, there was nothing about the girl's manner to indicate that she had anything at stake.

For an instant there flashed into his mind a suspicion of trickery. Perhaps these would not be the Merrill riders after all. Perhaps they were Dervishers; and if they were? With an effort he forced that suspicion aside. He studied the girl's manner once more, and he could be certain now that the dappling of red which painted the bronze of her cheeks was born of elation.

Once she glanced across her shoulder into his eyes, and the message which lay there was one of comradeship. For the meantime, all other moods had been swept away. This was a race which they

two were running out together; it was a thrill of body which responded to the spirit of youth, and in the outward token of that thrill which lay in the girl's eyes there was a surety that behind it all was no trickery. There was comradeship for this moment, the closeness of comradeship which shares dangers alike. There was the spirit of youth which had risen up again to hold her in its grasp, which had painted into her cheeks and her eyes the sparkle of life, which had —

"I knew we'd make it," Miss Dick exclaimed abruptly.

"Make what?" Rangy asked, as he loosened the Winchester at his side. For he could see that unless something happened speedily, all they would make would be a clash with the enemy.

"The Pelican cave, of course," Miss Dick replied. "See it, off there?"

The direction indicated was to the left, and it seemed to Rangy Pete that the girl was pointing up a draw which branched off this main trail, but which, so far as he could see, offered no outlet.

Still, Miss Dick turned her cayuse directly towards it, and as she did so, from the distance to the right there came the distant clatter of horses' shod feet striking the bare rock. Miss Dick looked anxiously over her shoulder, but the Merrill punchers were not yet to be seen.

In front of him, as Rangy Pete rode, was this

offshoot draw from the main trail. Even at close range, it looked like a ragged, tapering cone cut out of the face of the buttes, but where it should have wound its way on and on through the tangled ways of butte land, it ended instead in a sharp wall of rock. It began like an ordinary butte land valley winding its way through the jumble of buttes, and it ended a quarter of a mile farther on in a dun, placid face of rock. From the distance, that wall of rock looked like a sheer one, impossible for man to climb in this haste which was now upon them; yet towards the left, perhaps half way from the ground to the top of the cliff, there was a black spot which seemed but a smear upon the gray face of the rock.

It was towards that black spot that the girl was riding, sitting sideways in her saddle and searching with her eyes the trail to the right, from which direction came the clatter of horses' hoofs. And now she had begun to talk, quickly, in jerky little imperative sentences, sentences which robbed Rangy Pete of all thought of command.

"Must make it fast. Half mile behind at the most. Passing echo rock. A stiff climb, but we'll make it, if you do what I say. When I dismount, you work fast. Throw off saddle and bridle. Turn cayuse loose. Take all food from your saddle bags and put it in mine. Get your rope ready now. Here's one from my saddle. Tie the ends together. When we get there, fasten one end around my saddle the

other to your belt. I'll climb first because I know the way. Drag the saddle up after us by the rope."

Miss Dick stopped as abruptly as she began, and Rangy found himself wondering at the quick command of her. It was almost as though she had enacted this scene many times before. There was about her, as well, a confidence which told Rangy that it had not even occurred to her that his views might not fit in with her plans. He looked at the face of the cliff, grown closer now and rising stark above them, and he wondered why that heavy saddle must be dragged up to that black hole which surely must be the mouth of the Pelican cave. Still, in spite of that, he found that he was tying the ends of the ropes together, just as Miss Dick had told him to.

Abruptly Miss Dick leaped from her cayuse, and began to work at the saddle and bridle with swift, sure hands. While working at his own, Rangy found that there was a calm haste about the girl, a swift deliberation which a tangled end of his emotions wanted to admire even while the bulk of his thought was with the peril of the situation which faced them.

Rangy Pete worked with mechanical swiftness, and shortly he found himself stooping over for Miss Dick's saddle.

A remarkably heavy thing, after all, for all its appearance of lightness — those saddle bags must be tightly packed.

Now he was at the foot of the cliff, and the girl was already climbing.

"Bring the saddle up a few feet. There is a ledge here to rest it on."

The distance to that black spot on the gray face of the cliff was not so great after all. Rangy could see now that it would be fifty feet, a trifle more at the most. Except for one or two narrow ledges, the climb was a sheer one. But it was an ancient way, known to the footsteps of some long-lost generation, for carefully chiseled out of the face of the rock were steps like the rungs of a ladder. It would be the cave of some tribe of man long passed from the face of the earth, a den towards which he and Miss Dick were climbing — a trap, as well.

Rangy stopped in his climbing.

"When they get us here, how long will it take them to starve us out?" he demanded suddenly. "Is there any food or water up there?"

"There is not."

"Then there's nothing to be gained by starvin' in a cave, Miss. I'd better be stayin' down below. I'll fight 'em off till after dark, and then mabbe you can slip down and mooch it outa the way."

"Come, Mr. Pete. Please hurry. They are almost here. I can hear the horses again."

"No, Miss. They ain't no use for me to get up into that cave. I've hadda think fast, and the way I see it, we can't take no chances of lettin' them

camp around the bottom of this cliff. They'd shore have us corralled tighter'n a drum. But if I stay at the bottom, behind one of them rocks, and kinda discourage them from nosin' up here too close, while you salutes them from above, we got a chance. We might slip out after dark — ”

Behind him came the sudden clatter of galloping horses, as the foremost riders rounded the point of rock from the main trail several hundred yards away.

“I'd better slope it back quick,” Rangy declared, as he made a downward step.

“No! No!” Miss Dick exclaimed, with a trace of excitement in her manner. “This is not a cave. I hadn't intended to tell you, but it is the way through the buttes. Come. Hurry. They will be shooting soon.”

Rangy liked that excitement in the girl's tones. There was a personal note in it which brought back the old thrill. There was, as well, a suggestion of concern which he was too human to overlook.

“That's different. I'm with you, long's we ain't a hornin' our way into no corral what we can't find our way out of. You just run along fast. I'll be right after you.”

That new thrill was still running warm in the veins of Rangy Pete as they climbed the face of the cliff. In his brain was a consciousness that Miss Dick did not want to leave him to the mercies of the riders from the Snaky Y; but this was no time to look about

for her motives. In his ears was the sound of galloping horses. Rangy did not look around, for he dreaded the moment when those sounds must cease.

Miss Dick climbed briskly. Now she was at the very edge of the cave. A few more steps and he would be at her side.

Abruptly the clatter of horses' hoofs died away. Rangy Pete knew the meaning of that.

"Hurry," he exclaimed. "They'll be shooting now — "

Almost as he spoke, there came the whine of a bullet and a dull, shattering sound as it bit its way into the face of the cliff, then fell back lifeless.

Miss Dick threw herself over the edge of the cave. Just two steps more to make himself and he would be at her side. Behind him there was the sharp snapping of pistol shots. At his side was the deadened thud of bullets.

Now he was at the edge of the cave — the girl's arm was thrust out to pull him more swiftly into safety. More bullets, whining their way past his head, or biting ineptly at the cold face of the rock. He was at the edge now, tumbling into safety — he had beaten them —

Beaten them — what was that hot, searing sensation which cut its way through his right leg and left it all but powerless? What was that dizzying reel in his brain? Miss Dick at his side, tugging now at that rope which he had fastened about his waist.

Strange, but he had forgotten that. There was a saddle at the far end of that rope, a remarkably heavy saddle which Miss Dick, through some foolish mood, was trying to rescue from the Snaky Y punchers.

Rangy put his hand to the rope, and tugged with Miss Dick. Still firing outside. Doubtless trying to cut the rope with their bullets. Through an endless period that firing continued, while he labored beside the girl. In time, many hours later, it seemed, the sound of angry bullets died away, and the drab old saddle crawled through the mouth of the cave and lay there before him.

"Foolish old thing," Rangy muttered, conscious that he was caught in the grip of some unusual circumstance.

Miss Dick swung towards him quickly.

"You're hurt?" she exclaimed instantly, and again Rangy was aware of that personal note.

It was such a pleasing thing, that personal note in the girl's voice. It was pleasing, as well, to see that sudden flash of alarm which leaped into her eyes. Alarm, for him. Queer old world. How topsy-turvy things had become. Miss Dick, the bandit, feeling alarm for him!

"Just a scratch. Ain't nothin'," Rangy declared, though quite conscious that he did not want that alarm to die out of the girl's features.

"Nothin' atoll," he insisted, and to prove that

fact he tried to rise to his feet. He reached that position, in a tottering way, only to tumble back to the floor of the cave when he put his foot to the ground.

He tumbled to the floor of the cave. He knew that perfectly well. It was quite natural that he should do so; but the rest of it was all strange. It was not natural that the floor of the cave should open up before him and that he should keep on tumbling and tumbling, on and on, falling through endless space, through rocks and trees and clouds, through alternate light and darkness, through new and old scenes — yes, it was most natural after all. A moment ago he had not known himself. Now it was quite all right. He knew himself. He remembered it all distinctly. He was Dan Merrill, and he had just been killed by Bill Sonnes when they fought over Shifty Lizz back in Tony Burke's saloon.

Darkness!

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN the darkness gradually gave way to rifts of light here and there, Rangy Pete was conscious of an occasional snapping, whining sound which touched some vague spot in his memory. There would come a dreary, whining slur which he knew quite well, followed by a rattling, shattering succession of noises quite unfamiliar to his senses. From time to time, near at hand, there was a sharp stabbing of the air which reached his ear-drums with unnecessary violence, and always, it seemed to him, that was followed by the whining and shattering of other sounds.

Once, when that volume of unfamiliar noise grew intense, Rangy Pete opened his eyes wearily. The scene was familiar enough, but that sound did not belong to him at all. The scene was the edge of the earth. It was that black cave from which he had tumbled into eternity when Bill Sonnes shot him back there in Burke's saloon. That was quite right; but this slithering noise, like some giant hammer chopping at blocks of stone — it was annoying. It ruffled the peacefulness of eternity. It — queer, but there seemed to be a physical side to him now; there was now a dragging something clattering all

about that lightness of soul which through unlimited years had been wandering through infinite spaces; there was a restraining something hedged all about that mentality which but a moment ago had known neither bounds nor limits; there was —

Rangy Pete opened his eyes again. There was a searing in his right leg, just above the knee. Gad. There was a girl right in front of him. She had a Winchester in her hands, and she was firing from time to time out the mouth of the cave. And that shattering volume of noise was made by the occasional bullet which whipped upward from the ground, bit into the roof of the cave and loosened fragments of rock all about them. There was the echo of the Winchester as the reverberations of sound traveled the length of the cave like the rumblings of distant thunder, and then died away. There was the acrid smell of burnt powder upon the air — there was a bandage about his leg which had stopped the flow of blood.

Rangy Pete rose to his elbow, and as he did so, Miss Dick swung about to face him. There was a brilliance in her eyes, a glow upon her cheeks, which he had never seen before. There was a keenness of battle in her pose, which in some unexplained manner recalled to him the poise of a mother wolf he had once seen fighting for her young.

“Looks as though they pinked me,” Rangy muttered. “What’s going on now?”

"Nothing. We're just exchanging friendly salutes. I am letting the Merrill gang know it wouldn't be wise to try to climb up that stairway. How are you feeling, Mr. Pete?"

"Like a branded maverick, I'm thinkin'. But why haven't you sloped it long ago?"

"They would have had you strung up by this time," the girl replied calmly. "I had to stay, Mr. Pete, because I knew the curiosity of that bunch of riders. One of them just climbed up the stairs. I nicked him a little. That is what the firing has been about. It has stopped now."

The sound of firing had died away, and through the calm which settled down upon them Rangy felt that he could think more clearly.

He found that his head had been pillowed upon Miss Dick's saddle, so he let it fall back again, and he lay there contemplating the girl and the scene about him. This cave was pleasantly, restfully robed in the soft shades of twilight, though from the color of the air beyond, he knew it must still be daylight in the world outside.

The sun, he could remember, had been slanting down behind the butte tops when he and Miss Dick made that dash for the Pelican cave way back in the distant ages when some other race of mankind lived upon the earth. And still there was daylight outside. This must mean that, after all, he had not been traveling for years and generations through

those mystic and darkened realms which held him for a time, but that, in reality, it could have been but a few minutes.

Yet in those few minutes Miss Dick had been active. She had bound up his wound which felt hot and restless now; she had pillowed his head upon her saddle; she had found stones in some strange manner with which to build a barricade between them and the mouth of the cave, and she had fought off the punchers.

Rangy Pete looked about him — at the barricade, at the clear, day-lit air beyond.

“So you nicked one of the punchers?” he asked meditatively.

“Just a little. Through the arm. He would insist upon coming up here even after I had fired a couple of shots into the air. That squares accounts for you.”

There were facts which Rangy must get firmly fixed in his mind, facts which somehow had become warped and distorted through that age he had spent in another world.

“And didn’t you say something about this not being a cave, but that it runs through the buttes to the land of the Dervishers?”

Miss Dick nodded.

There could be no doubt of it now. Miss Dick had saved his life — and the price she had paid had been her own opportunity to escape.

"You know your way through the cave?" Rangy pressed, caught in the abrupt knowledge that he must be quite clear upon that point.

Miss Dick laughed easily.

"Know the way? I have known it since a child. Day or night I know it. It leads off here into the dark — and from the dark, Mr. Rangy Pete, if you take the right steps and the right turns, you come out into the light on the top of the buttes, and then, if you take the right steps again, you come down into the land of the Dervishers, as you call it — though we call it home —"

Was it wistfulness or humor in the girl's voice? There was still a sparkle in her eyes, he knew, but that had come from battle.

"And no one knows where this queer path leads down into — into your home?" Rangy asked. "I mean no one but Dervishers."

"No one but Dervishers."

"Then, girl, you had better be going before the punchers come again — "

Miss Dick looked at him strangely, so strangely that Rangy stumbled over his words.

"They'll be coming again — mustn't let them brand you with a bullet — I'll hold them off for a while — I'm thinkin' I could keep them busy a whole night — "

Rangy Pete broke off, for there was something in the girl's silence which told him that his words were

all foolishness. She turned her eyes away swiftly, and she began to busy herself with the weapons which lay at her side. Rangy lay still and watched her for some minutes; and as he watched, he listened for sounds from the punchers down below. Miss Dick's activity, he discovered, was spurious, for though her fingers were busy, she was doing nothing. From beyond the mouth of the cave, there came an occasional sound which betrayed to him the temper of the punchers. There was silence, broken at times by the angry whip of a bullet as it cut through the mouth of the cave and bit into the rocky roof beyond them. There drifted up to him an odor of campfire smoke, quite different from this acrid smell of powder; and that spoke of camps for the night.

Through the mouth of the cave, the crystal of the air was thinning. Dark shadows were showing on the buttes beyond. The twilight of this cave was growing denser. Night was coming upon them, and the punchers were camping in the draw below. Determined to catch them, no doubt, believing they were trapped in this hole in the wall of the cliff. Knowing, or thinking they knew, that it would be only a matter of time until starvation forced them to yield.

If only there were not that searing burn in his leg, he would laugh at them now. But there was that crumpled leg, and there was also Miss Dick before him, toying with a six-gun, cleaning it again

and again. He, at least, was trapped. But why must this girl suffer with him? Yet he dreaded that strange look which came into her eyes when he spoke to her of escape.

Rangy's left hand strayed up to toy with the tip of his left ear. He cleared his throat, and he began resolutely.

"Now, Miss Dick, I'm gonna throw the rope straight this time, an' tell you they just ain't no use of the both of us being caught by them wild-men punchers down below — "

The girl bandit turned her face towards him again, and though the deepening of twilight threw her features into shadow, he could still see the sparkle of her eyes.

"Shore, Mr. Pete," she returned, mimicking his voice, "but you don't go far enough. I don't see any use of either of us being caught."

"You don't? With a dozen punchers down below, and a whole army of most nigh fifty on the way."

Miss Dick shook her head firmly.

"What difference does it make how many there are? Only one man can climb those steps at a time."

Rangy was almost startled at the calm deliberation of her voice and manner. There was about her now some of the cool fighting instinct which he knew to be a characteristic of the born gunman. But with Miss Dick it was different. She was cornered, while they had fought for the pure love of it.

"That's what I'm sayin'," Rangy returned slowly. "I could fight them off all night an' tomorrer, an' while I'm doin' that, you could be lookin' up a more healthy climate. I'd shore like to go with you, but seein' as one of them punchers had to go and brand me on the leg — "

"The bone isn't broken. You'll be able to crawl along in less than a week," Miss Dick interrupted swiftly, almost with violence in her manner.

Rangy Pete leaned forward to study this queer half-shrinking, half-arrogant mood which held the girl in its grip. But Miss Dick turned her face away and the growing shadows of twilight told him nothing.

"That sounds good," Rangy reflected, "but you shore don't think I could stand them off for a week?"

"No. But the two of us could."

Rangy laughed uneasily.

"I couldn't possibly let you take a chance like that. We'd be starved out, or you might get hit yoreself — "

This time Miss Dick leaned over him quickly, and even through the shadows he could see the flash of her eyes.

"If I were you — if I were lying as you are now, would you desert me, Rangy Pete?" the girl demanded, and now he knew there was real anger in her manner, anger because of his inference that she should not play the game to the end. "Tell me

that, and I will know whether to go or to stay."

"Shore, I'd leave you," Rangy replied calmly. "Every maverick for himself when they's a stampede on — "

"You lie, Rangy Pete. I am going to stay. We will fight them off until you are well enough to get away through the cave."

Rangy Pete nodded, with the old thrill coursing its way through his veins. He had known long ago that Miss Dick was one of the prizes of earth. He knew now that she would be a comrade whom man could never forget. He thrilled in her presence. If only he could know the motive which urged her on.

"You shore got the markin's of a thoroughbred," he reflected in admiration. "They ain't no reason why you shouldn't stay a while, and if it gets too hot at any time you can always make yore escape — "

"Can't you see there isn't going to be much fighting?" Miss Dick replied more calmly. "They think we are trapped. They are not going to risk men up those steps. No, they will sit down to starve us out. They can't do that in a week. There is a lot of food in my saddle-bags, and if it gets too bad I can slip out the back door at night. No, Mr. Rangy Pete, all we have to do is to sit down quietly for a few days until your leg gets so you can crawl with it."

"P'raps yer right," Rangy conceded.

"Perhaps? Of course I'm right," the girl declared

briskly, as she rose to her feet and disappeared in the darkened recesses of the cave.

Rangy Pete felt a feverish restlessness stealing over him. There was the pain of his wound which throbbed its way through his veins, but greater than that, there was the uncertainty of the future which Miss Dick had chosen for herself. He wondered if the girl really knew what the immediate future must mean to her. Did she know that the whole burden of battle would fall upon her? Or did that strange light in her eyes mean that she welcomed battle?

There was that fever creeping into his blood. Doubtless in a few hours he would be delirious. Then there would be hours, days perhaps, through which he would be helpless. And through those days and hours, what would Miss Dick be doing? Fighting against thirst, starvation, and an army of reckless punchers. Fighting for him. Could she possibly know the horror of those days which were before her now? Could she know the torment of days and nights when the body must keep on toiling, and when the eyes dare not close in sleep?

Rangy's eyes stole into the darkness of the cave, and there he saw the dim outline of the girl's figure moving about. Presently she came back with a fragment of rock in her arms, and she placed this on top of the barricade which she had built during his first trip into realms beyond the earth. For a time, with that fever creeping higher and higher in

his blood, he watched the girl passing back and forth, toiling with the rock which made the barricade more and more effective. Shortly he discovered that she was doing this to shelter his position from stray bullets; but that knowledge only added to the flush of the fever which was burning its way through his body. Instead of asking him to move, she was building a barricade of rock between him and all possible harm. She left an opening in the wall, she spread a blanket beside that opening and placed a loaded Winchester and six-gun upon the blanket. Then she carefully stored the food somewhere in the darkness beyond. After that, Miss Dick came and sat down upon the blanket, some six feet from where Rangy Pete lay.

It was dark in the cave now. It was dark, as well, in the air beyond. Either that, or his brain was already playing strange tricks upon him.

"Good Lord, Miss," Rangy spoke suddenly from the depths of his heart, "you can't know what the next few days will mean — better go now. You'll have a terrible time if you stay —"

The girl leaned forward and passed her hand lightly over his forehead.

"Fever already," she muttered. "Take a drink, Mr. Rangy, and go to sleep if you can. You will feel better in the morning."

With a strange desire to be obedient, he drank what the girl put to his lips. A moment later he was

caught in a mixed wave of humiliation and gratitude. She had given him water from her own canteen, and he had taken it before he thought. Rangy leaned back against the saddle, cushioned with a blanket, and he tried to study the face of the girl at his side. That was impossible, because of the film of darkness but there was no reason why his brain, feverish as it was, could not picture Miss Dick's face after she had passed through days of thirst and starvation. And she would do that for him. She *must* know something of the horror of the immediate future, and yet she was sitting there calmly, staring out into the night. She would be watching the mouth of the cave, watching that spot where a man's head must show up against the blot of night — if any man had the courage.

Rangy could not see the lip of the cave. He was almost glad of that. But he could see the sky beyond. He knew it must be sky, because it was a dark gray patch thrown out against the surrounding world of darkness.

For hours and hours, it seemed to Rangy Pete, he watched that gray patch of sky, and as he watched, it gradually grew lighter, with a silvery sheen. That would be his imagination, or the fever — no — it was the coming of moonlight — moonlight? Was it last night, or had it been a myriad years ago that he rode along a strip of moonlight with a girl at his side?

Moonlight! For hours and hours it danced and glittered out there in the radiant air beyond the lip of the cave. Or was it minutes only? The girl barely moved, except to glance from time to time in his direction. He could tell that by the fling of her head. Silence in the world beyond, except for a snatch of campfire song which floated up through the moonlit air. Laughter; at times the sound of bickering voices. Rangy Pete knew that scene so well, just as well as though he had been seated at the side of the fire flipping the cards or sharing in the banter. He knew there was no hope that the camp would melt away and that he and Miss Dick would be left to their own resources.

Miss Dick, watching steadily that one point at the lip of the cave where a man's head must appear, sooner or later! It was inevitable that in any gang of a dozen punchers there must be at least one who would have the folly to climb that flight of stairs notched into the face of the rock; there would be at least one man who through the night would dare to peer over the mouth of the cave. And the girl sitting there so calmly, with weapons at her hands, waiting for the inevitable. She must know what he, Rangy Pete, knew — that there was more to be feared from folly than from actual attack. For what half-score of punchers can sit about a camp-fire at night, with their quarry in sight, without being touched in some manner by the spirit of folly?

Miss Dick must know that, for she was waiting, sheltered behind the barricade, but in such position that her presence must be stern discipline for folly. Even through the fever which was burning into his system, Rangy felt like shuddering. Would the girl play the cold game of discipline, or would she barter with the enemy? Would she calmly shoot the first head which showed above the lip of the cave, or —

Moonlight? Of course that was moonlight, and it was through moonlight he had ridden some centuries ago, with this girl at his side. Moonlight in the air beyond. Stealing now into the cave itself. Glinting and shimmering back from the girl's head whenever she glanced about — glistening just as it had done last night when he rode that silent trail from the Crag — yes, it was last night that he had ridden with Miss Dick. It was last night he had ridden in arrogance, confident of the future, certain of his sway over her, certain that he was to take her back to Triple Butte to teach her — what was that he had thought to teach Miss Dick? Something about mankind. And here was she now, sitting there so calmly, with a six-gun in her hand, waiting to shoot the first head which peered above that dangerous lip of the rock. Queer, how topsy-turvy the world had become. And this fever in his blood, this pain in his right leg —

The girl's cool hand now upon his forehead. A caressing, mothering touch there, something soothing.

Or was that, too, but the antics of his imagination? But while the hand was there, he lost his desire to toss about, his brain became clearer, and he could see now beyond doubt that it was moonlight which was glinting back from Miss Dick's hair. It was moonlight, too, which showed him the soft lines about the girl's features, lines softer and more pitying than any he had seen there before. And was there, as well, something longing in the girl's eyes as she leaned above him, her hand still upon his forehead? Was there a soft, lingering caress in her voice as she whispered a soothing, child-like song? Why should he feel suddenly happy, in spite of the fever and the pain? Perhaps that, as well, was but a trick of the fever, perhaps.

Yet that could hardly be, for now that the girl leaned back into her old pose of watchfulness, he could see clearly the lines of her features as the moonlight filtered into the mouth of the cave. There was something stern, yet soft and mothering in the girl's countenance, the croon of a little song upon her lips. Strange, that she should be sitting there so calmly, waiting to shoot a man, or many men if need be, and that there should be the soothing of faint song in the air. An unusual kind of girl, he must admit, which he should have recognized and admitted long ago. Quite too late now. And she was doing this for him!

Moonlight! Peering, inquisitive moonlight, sifting

its way into the cave until he could see the girl's features quite distinctly. Moonlight, playing with its fantastic fingers over the scene beyond the mouth of the cave. It must be doing that, for the patch of sky which crossed his vision was clean, and the laughter reached him clearly through the rarified atmosphere. He knew just what a wonderful night it must be out there in the butte land moonlight — wonderful, but not quite like the domestic peace of this other scene of which he was a part. Peace. That burning of fever had become almost a restful thing.

Moonlight beyond — shattered suddenly by the bark of a six-gun.

Rangy waited for the sound of that annoying clatter of rock which must come when a bullet bit into the roof of the cave — the sound did not come. Poor shooting. That idiot down below had not even been able to hit the black spot which was the mouth of the cave — more shots. A quick, barking fusilade of them. Somehow they seemed to come from a distance. The dying of laughter, the quick oaths of men. Another fusilade of shots — the whooping of healthy male voices. Silence down below, broken only by an anxious oath — a confusing situation. What could it mean?

Foolish of him! Of course that would be the arrival of the army of punchers who had followed him all through the day and the night.

Still more shots, and angered voices. Miss Dick peering cautiously from the edge of the cave.

"Come back, girl," Rangy called in a whisper. "They might shoot you."

Miss Dick came back to his side. She put her hand once more upon his forehead, and looked down upon him. Surely her eyes were shining with excitement.

"They are fighting out there, Rangy Pete," she spoke quietly. "What can that mean?"

"Fighting? Out there?" he asked in a puzzled way.

"Yes, the men who have just ridden in — the army which was behind us — they are fighting these Merrill punchers. What can it mean?"

Rangy's answer was an inarticulate mumble of words. It was better to lie here thus, with the girl's cool hand upon his forehead, than to try to solve the foolish problems of cow punchers. If they chose to fight, what did it matter to him? He preferred the peace of this silent cave. A ragged wrangle of shots down below — a quick burst of sound, the dominance of a man's voice — then silence.

Silence, except for the untraceable blur of sound which told of the presence of many men, but which in some ways seemed but a part of the silence of the night. What matter, ten men or a thousand? Only one man could climb that stairway at a time; only one man at a time could fall back to his death. Miss Dick, the efficient, he wondered now if she

would weary of the killing of men through the days before he dared to travel out through the back of the cave into the land of the Dervishers. He should not let her do that thing. It was wrong, but with this fever and this weakness upon him, what was there for him to do? Order Miss Dick to leave him — what good were orders to one who refused to obey? The code, the teaching of his code of mankind — Miss Dick's hand upon his brow, stroking the fever away with gentle fingers — voices, annoying voices down below. Insistent voices, bellowing constantly.

The girl leaned closer.

"They are calling you by name, Rangy Pete," she whispered. "Do you not hear them?"

"Shore I hear them. Idyots! Tell 'em to be still."

"There's a man there who calls you his friend," the girl's voice continued to whisper. "He says everything is all right now. He calls himself Ike Collander. You know Ike Collander, Rangy?"

"Shore — Li'l Ike of the 'vaporated apples. Gosh A'mighty!"

Rangy rallied as though from fitful slumber. He partly pulled himself to one elbow, and he studied the scene about him with curious eyes. He listened for a moment to those voices down below.

"I musta been a wanderin' in my head, Miss. I thought I heard somebody say somethin' about Ike Collander —"

"You did."

From below came the long, drawn-out hail of an anxious voice.

"What's the matter, Rangy? Whyn't you been answerin'?"

"Ike!" Rangy exclaimed. "Ike Collander shore enough!"

Then Rangy Pete raised his voice in welcome to Ike Collander. Immediately there came back a babel of sound. There was the clamor of mixed voices, and when the confusion died away, there came again the voice of Ike Collander.

"I'm comin' up there, Rangy, so jest you go to holdin' yore hosses easy. Don't get no fightin' idea into yore head."

The only sound which reached him now was the scraping of the man's shod feet as they groped and found those steps cut out of the face of the rock.

"Pull me forward, just a little," Rangy Pete whispered to the girl at his side, "just enough so's I can see Ike the minute he sticks his head up."

The girl obeyed without answering. Then instantly she sank back into the darkened portion of the cave behind the barricade. While those scraping sounds came from beyond the cave, Rangy reached out and put one hand upon the girl's arm. It was more restful thus. It brought for the time being a clarity of brain, when before his thoughts had been wandering. If by any chance his senses had been tricking him, the touch of the girl's arm would help him

through. How restful to be able to lean thus upon another.

Moonlight beyond — the faintest shimmer of it penetrating here and lighting up the gleam of the girl's eyes. Ike's groping fingers upon the lip of the cave. A head showing up against the clear background of sky. Six feet distant. A man could sit here and kill and kill until the weariness of killing — But no, he must hold close grip upon himself.

"Hey there, you ole tarnation idyot, whyn't you been answerin' me afore?" Collander's voice was just on a level with the mouth of the cave. "But that shore is some castle you got there, Rangy — "

"Shore, li'l Ike. Ain't you got no manners? What you doin' a hangin' on my front doorstep? And who's them noisy friends you got down below?"

Ike Collander still clung to the mouth of the cave.

"They's a hull bunch of fellers what you know, Rangy. They's Jumbo Irish, and Ring'em Foster, and — but I'm comin' in to look around — "

"Yer a gonna stay right where you are, Mr. Ike, till I knows what you come for. You come to take me back to Triple Butte?"

"You pore idyot. They shore must be sumthin' wrong with you, Rangy. We come up the Pelican draw a chasin' Dervishers, an' we heard they's a bunch of Snaky Y punchers got you trapped here in a cave, so we moseyed right along. 'Tain't been no fun for them, Rangy, 'cause they's about a half

dozen of them all nicked up and whining around. An' now that you know yer with friends, can't I come in, Rangy?"

"Shore, Ike. You won't find me good for much, but — "

The faint flutter of Miss Dick's arm beneath the pressure of his hand caused the words to break upon Rangy's lips.

Miss Dick, the bandit, was now entirely within his power. She was where he might teach to her that code of mankind. She was conscious of that; she must be. But beyond that first flutter of her arm, the girl gave no sign that she appreciated the full meaning of this swift turn of events. It would be so easy now, to hand Miss Dick over to the army from Triple Butte, to the punchers from the Triangle O and the Double K.

Rangy Pete's fingers traveled down the girl's arm until they met her hand.

Ike Collander out there, just a few feet away, making a great clattering noise as he scrambled over the lip of the cave.

Rangy carried the girl's fingers to his lips.

"Good-bye, girl. Go, quick. Ike'll be here in a minute."

"Go?" she asked in astonishment.

"Yes, go."

Miss Dick rose to her feet and vanished into the darkness of the inner cave.

"They shore got me all bunged up, Ike," Rangy greeted his old associate. "Nicked in the leg. You come just in time."

Ike Collander became solicitous. He examined Rangy as best he could, then he pronounced his judgment.

"We shore gotta get some things up here, Rangy. I'm thinkin' I'd better be sayin' something to them idyots down below."

Collander returned to the lip of the cave. Immediately he engaged in animated conversation with the punchers at the foot of the cliff. Rangy Pete gathered that Collander was issuing many instructions and was arguing over them all. In some way or other those instructions had to do with caring for him here in Pelican cave, but Rangy did not listen closely. It was all wearying detail. Besides, he missed the coolness of that hand which had rested upon his forehead. The fever, he knew, was coming back again —

Yes, the fever *was* coming back, or why would he have fancied that Miss Dick was again at his side, that she was looking down upon him with widely curious eyes? That fever must be very bad indeed, or why would he have believed that he heard her voice?

"Rangy, you sure are a trump card."

It was just a whisper, a mere thread of a voice. Still, he was quite sure that it existed. He opened

his eyes more widely. Yes, the girl was actually before him.

"Then you are not going to take me back to Triple Butte after all, to teach me the code of man?" The lips were smiling, and the girl's eyes were dazzling.

"No, little girl," Rangy whispered back, through his weariness. "They ain't nothin' I would'n do to have you with me all the time, so that's why I gotta let you go —"

"Poor, mixed-up Rangy," the girl replied. "We must hurry, because Ike will soon be back. But there is a present I have for you, Rangy. Will you take it?"

"What is it, Blue Eyes?"

"Nothing but that saddle you're lying upon. If you look in the saddle bags you will find ten thousand dollars there in gold."

Miss Dick rose to her feet, and made as though to slip once more into the darkness of the cave. But Rangy rose to his elbow, and by the mere strength of his purpose he compelled her to remain.

"Talkin' about trumps, little girl, you shore is the most wonderful trump that ever got into a pack. Why are you doing this for me, little girl?"

"Why are you letting me get away, when you might keep me here?"

"Is that the only reason, girl?"

"No, it shore ain't," the girl mimicked, and Rangy fancied that back of her mimicry there was a catch

in her voice. "I am doing it because I didn't want you to think too badly of me, Rangy, after I am gone. I wanted you to know that I didn't steal it for myself, but just to help a friend of mine. You know who. Merrill hasn't played the game with him, and when I heard about this ten thousand — you can do the rest — Ike is coming. We must hurry, Rangy — I did it because — close your eyes, Rangy, and I will tell you the other reason."

In a strange whim of obedience, as though the spell of the girl were about him, Rangy Pete closed his eyes. It was wonderful to feel thus her presence about him. It was almost a denial to the threat of farewell that he should now sense the thrill of her form hovering above him.

Then he felt the swift warmth of her lips upon his fevered forehead.

Rangy threw out his arms to catch her in his grasp, but when his arms closed again there was no human form within them. He opened his eyes, only to see the girl standing some paces from him. Rangy could not see her face but he knew that the eyes must be sparkling, and the ripple of laughter which reached him through the darkness carried with it a message of gladness.

With a feverish effort, he struggled into a sitting posture. But Miss Dick was vanishing into the darkness of the inner cave, and already there was the rattling sound of Ike Collander's return.

"Come back, Little Blue Eyes!" he called out, in a clear, thin voice, "for there's something I got to say to you, and I'll be waiting."

Collander stepped forward to his side in a startled way.

"What's that you're saying, Rangy?" he asked, in a worried voice. "You think you're a-talking to somebody?"

"Was I talkin'?" Rangy asked, with but little of the old vitality in his tones. "You mustn't mind me, Ike, 'cause I sometimes get queer ideas in my head. And, Ike, I'm awful glad you come."

With that, Rangy Pete sank back upon the improvised bed which Miss Dick had made for him, and he closed his eyes as though in yielding to the blackness of suffering. Then Collander put a hand to his brow.

"Fever. Running hot," he pronounced. "We shore did get here just in time. He couldn't a fought off them Merrill buckos much longer — "

But Rangy shifted restlessly.

"Fever, nothing," he declared, though with a palpable effort to keep control of his senses. "Can't a fellow think but what you've gotta call it fever. I suppose I gotta keep my eyes open now."

Rangy's eyes did remain open, staring fixedly into the darkness at the roof of the cave, and while they stared, the brain back of them was recalling the picture of Miss Dick, the bandit, who had entrusted

to his care some ten thousand dollars in stolen gold. But she had not stolen it for herself! For a time the thrill of that almost drove the fever from his blood.

At length, after long staring into the blackness, Rangy nodded his head sharply. The girl's purpose was clear, though the motive back of it might still be shrouded in the darkness of night.

"Ike," he called suddenly, still with that struggling grip upon his senses, "Ring'em Foster come with you — is Stipples and Dan Merrill there?"

"They wasn't here when I got in with Ring'em, or we mighta had a real scrap, but they both come since. They was riding together in a posse."

Rangy stared again, as though his faculties were laboring.

"You come with Ring'em?" he asked. "How come that you and Ring'em herded up together? You mean to say it was you sloped out and told Foster what was going on?"

Collander's simple and somewhat shamed nod was the only answer.

"Good ole Ike!" Rangy muttered. "But yore work ain't done yet. You bring them three persons up here."

Through a period of fevered gripping at his flitting senses, Rangy lay back and struggled with this problem before him. Miss Dick had stolen, and yet she had not stolen. She had more nearly played the

part of a Robin Hood. Through some strange cycle of events which his imagination could not penetrate, Miss Dick and Ring'em Foster must fit somewhere into the patchwork of the past. But the problem of that was too much for his tortured brain, particularly when it brought with it a throb of pain which almost deadened the memory of that warm kiss upon his brow.

Things, at the best, were all topsy-turvy. The one thing of which he could be certain was that it was the girl who had warned Ring'em Foster many nights ago to travel to Triple Butte and collect ten thousand dollars from Dan Merrill. The threads leading up to that did not matter. The money, by the application of all moral codes, really belonged to Foster, and Miss Dick had just been playing the role of a Robin Hood.

Playing it for the sake of Ring'em Foster! The thought of that was torment.

Still, she had helped to check up the debt-dodging Dan Merrill and now that was the sound of Merrill's querulous voice as the three men made their way up the face of the cliff.

There was the tramping of feet, the mockery of Merrill's sneering laughter; and when Rangy opened his eyes, the three men stood there, in the shadows of the moonlight, looking down upon him. In the background was Ike Collander, looking wistfully at Rangy Pete, and with a huge derringer dangling at

his right hip. Ike was bending upon Rangy many reassuring nods, he tapped the derringer significantly.

"Well, Stipples, you got him at last!" Merrill barked in a vicious voice whose echoes rumbled and moaned their way into the inner caverns. "Got him, Stipples! All nicked up, as he should be. Now, you highwayman, don't you see how the tables can turn?"

Rangy Pete blinked up through the shifting moonlight.

"Kinda drag me out to the edge of the cave where I can see yore faces better," he spoke almost tonelessly. "That's all right. Now, you three gents, set back there in a row. Stipples, you get between them two mavericks — no — you'd better unlimber their guns — "

Merrill broke in with contemptuous laughter.

"What horse play is this?" he demanded. "I'll line up for nobody. Stipples, put that fool under arrest, and we'll drag him out to Triple Butte."

Though it cost him an effort, Rangy forced a smile to his lips.

"If you're taking a tip from me, Merrill," he spoke softly, "you'll be kinda hankering in about a minute or two for Ring'em not to have a gun in his fingers. Now you gonna give up the hardware to Stipples?"

For the first time, it seemed, Merrill sensed something dramatic in the background. Still he blustered violently as he handed his weapons to Stipples.

"I'm here to get you for finishing off Sonnes," he threatened ominously, "but it don't matter whether it's me or Stipples who arrests you. You finished Sonnes, 'cause Smithers saw you."

"Is that right, Rangy?" Ring'em Foster spoke for the first time. His voice was cool and deliberate, and in that instant, because of the man's calmness, Rangy lost some of his wonder at the seeming peace between Merrill and Foster.

It was not peace. It was, instead, the reserve of judgment.

"Shore thing," Rangy agreed, "and when you hear about it, you'll be giving me a medal."

"You see," Merrill bellowed his interruption, "he admits it. We'd better string him up now, Ring'em."

Rangy raised his hand, and Ike Collander stepped swiftly to his side, his eyes glaring with a hardness rarely seen upon his flaccid countenance.

"That's all right, Ike," Rangy soothed. "We ain't here to talk about Sonnes. Leastways, not till we've finished that little talk what Ring'em and Dan and me started in Tony Burke's back room a night or so ago — don't go to jerking that way, Dan. Ring'em ain't got any guns on him. You remember, Dan, you didn't know anything about ten thousand dollars that night, what somebody wrote Ring'em to collect?"

Merrill's features had abruptly lost the most of their arrogance. The man's eyes darted swiftly from

side to side, and for an instant they looked frantically out into the moonlight, as though he were considering the wisdom of hurried flight.

"There ain't no getting away from here, Dan," Rangy went on, in weaker tones, "'cause Ike's standing over you with a derringer. Now, Stipples, you just go to looking into these saddle bags — "

Stipples, the astounded, did as instructed.

When the yellow coins began to slither out into the moonlight, Merrill reached forward with animal swiftness. But Foster stood before him.

"Where did you find that, Rangy?" he asked crisply.

"In a box of 'vaporated apples what Dan had shipped in from the East. There's ten thousand there, but you mustn't do anything rough, Ring'em, 'cause Dan ain't done anything but double cross you, same as he's been doing with everybody else. You can't expect him to be paying his debts when he's been saving up the yellow boys like this to skip the country."

Rangy paused because of the ominous calm which settled down upon them.

In that instant, Ring'em Foster reached swiftly for his six-gun, but finding only the empty holster, he dropped his hand with a gesture of disgust. Then he stepped quickly forward and looked fairly into Merrill's shrinking eyes.

"Remember what I told you, Merrill," Foster's

voice came harsh and crisp. "I told you that if you were trying to double-cross me, there wouldn't be enough punchers at the Snaky Y to save yore hide. Now — what you got to say for yoreself?"

Merrill's only answer was a grasping of the fingers towards that pile of glittering gold.

"It's not yours," Foster spoke with firm decision, "and you'll never get yore hands on it again. Stipples, take charge of it. And now you, Merrill — what have you to say?"

For a time the man blustered; then he attempted subterfuge.

"Shore, I'll pay it all to you, Foster," he whined. "You know I had to find some way to get it into the country."

"To double-cross me, you mean," Foster's tones had become deadly. "Stipples, give us back our guns. One each — "

"My God, no!" Merrill's thick tones had become a scream. "Not that, Foster. I ain't in shape. You know that. I been drinking."

Foster's contemptuous glance held him through a moment of fear.

"I've got ten thousand more back at the Snaky Y," Merrill's shaky voice went on, "That'll straighten up everything, Ring'em, and I'll go square. Honest to God, I will."

Dark purpose came into Foster's gaze.

"The guns, Stipples!"

Stipples, whether dominated by Foster's commanding manner, or through sudden contempt for Merrill, began to reach out the guns slowly, one towards each man.

Foster reached out for his weapon, but Merrill, with a gurgling in his throat, struck out savagely and knocked his own gun from Stipples' hand.

"God, Foster, I'll square everything!" he pleaded in a thickened voice. "Not that!"

"We know you'll square everything, one way or the other," Foster's tones were relentless. "It's this way, Merrill, gun to gun; or, it's out of the butte country for you, and out of it forever. Get that? Stay here with all the lead I can put into you, or out you go!"

Merrill swung about swiftly.

"I'll go," he whined. "I'll go tonight. Let me go back to the Snaky Y. I'll turn everything over to Stipples, to square things."

"You've been a crook, haven't you, Merrill!" Foster demanded unpityingly. "You've been trying to double cross everybody, to pile up a nice little fortune to skip the country with. Isn't that so?"

Merrill's blood-drained features became suddenly suffused with passion. He struggled for words, but they would not come.

"True or not true?" Foster insisted menacingly.

"My God, man!" Merrill moaned. "You can't expect me to say that."

Foster edged a trifle closer.

"You were debt-dodging and piling up money to skip," he charged. "True or not true. No quibbling."

Foster's gaze was a compelling one. It was hard and cold with all the struggle of years, and now it was dominating as well.

Abruptly Merrill swept a hand before his face as though fearing a blow.

"It's true," he gulped, "but I'll square everything. Honest to Heaven, I will, Ring'em."

"You bet you will," Foster pronounced grimly. "And then what will you do?"

Merrill cringed abjectly, in sudden haste to oblige.

"I'll get out of the country."

Ring'em Foster nodded sharply.

"It'd be a whole lot better if you'd shoot it out with me," he returned peevishly. "It might save some other gent the trouble of perforating you. All right, Stipples. Gather up that yellow stuff. If he won't be shot, we gotta put up with it and escort him over the state line. March, pronto, you gents. We'll get out of here."

Through the routine of departure, Ring'em Foster went to stand for a moment over the improvised couch of Rangy Pete. The latter's eyes, he could see, were dull, and there was the flush of fever upon his cheeks. Rangy moved restlessly, and made as though to speak, but Foster waved him into silence.

"It's all right, Rangy, whatever it is," he said. "You shore done a good day's work, and we ain't gonna forget it."

Rangy's eyes drifted towards the blackness of the cave; he tried again to speak, then suddenly he sank back into the vague land of darkness.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER an eternal period of burning torment and fantastic visions through which his brain seemed never to rest, Rangy opened his eyes weakly and stared listlessly about him. The scene was a strange one, but nothing really mattered anyway. There were drab shadows all about, which appeared to have no part in the life he had always lived, and there was a man sitting in front of him, with back turned, and working at something which Rangy could not see.

Something remotely familiar about that back appealed to Rangy's dulled brain and held the weak gaze of his eyes. It didn't matter; still he would like to know what that person was doing there.

Rangy shifted in his position and was about to speak, when the man suddenly turned upon him.

"Jumpin' Jericho!" that individual exclaimed gladly. "You really got yore peepers open again, Rangy? I been wonderin' if you was ever going to consent to look on this wicked world again. Here's something for you to drink. A friend of vores brought it."

Ike Collander placed something to his lips, and Rangy promptly dozed into slumber again; but this

time it was sleep without those tormenting visions.

When he wakened again, his brain was much clearer and his limbs felt less leaden. The fingers of his memory began to toy with the past, and there was a vague appreciation of the fact that all things were not exactly as he would have them. There was this cave and Ike Collander — patient Ike Collander, whose services in a time of need were a pleasing thing; but, there was something lacking.

In time his memory pieced together those ragged patches of the past, and he knew just where the story of his life had broken.

"Ike, how long have I been here?" he asked at length.

"It's five days since you turned yore nose to the wall and wouldn't recognize anybody," Collander informed, with a sort of motherish hovering about him, "But you're right now as a grass-fed maverick and in about ten days we'll be hitting it back for Triple Butte."

"Where's the rest of the army, and what's happened?" Rangy insisted.

"Nothing happened," Collander chuckled, "though Ring'em did have kind of a hard time to keep them Snaky Y buckos from stringing up Dan Merrill, when they heard he'd been planning to skip out and leave them all howling for their wages. But nothing happened. They went through the Pass together, the Snaky Y and the Triangle O and the

Double K, and they mooched around a couple of days looking for Dervishers."

"And they didn't find a single Dervisher?" Rangy asked anxiously. "Shore you ain't lying to me, Ike?"

"Honest to goodness, they didn't find so much as hide or hair of a lone Dervisher," Collander informed hurriedly, "but you should see the way them Snaky Y boys knuckle to Ring'em. They ain't no good without a leader."

Rangy leaned back with a sigh of relief. Miss Dick, it became obvious, was completely able to look after herself. Yet, in doing that, it left a sort of aching void about the heart.

"Jumbo Irish is coming back in about a week or ten days with a couple of cayuses to pack you out," Collander went on. "They left us a lot of grub, and now you've got nothing to do but pick up and get to feeling yoreself again."

Ike Collander broke off abruptly, and instead of returning to that unknown task of his, he stood looking down upon Rangy Pete in a curious way.

"You're a funny one, Rangy," he blurted out at last. "Who is the lady?"

"What lady?" Rangy's question was almost an explosion of sound. "Don't stand there, Ike, trying to be mysterious, but go on and tell me."

Ike considered a moment, as though attempting to find the proper lead.

"The lady what comes to see you each night just at dusk," he informed in the end. "It's queer. Just like one of them romances what I seen once on the stage. She comes outa the dark of this cave every night, sits with you for an hour, gets some things to eat offen me, and then she goes back again —"

"Is she coming tonight, Ike?" Rangy demanded excitedly.

"I dunno. She said to me once that she'd come as long as you're unconscious."

"Then, Ike, I'm gonna be unconscious tonight, dead to the world; and don't you dare tell her anything different. And when you see her coming, you smooch it outa the way."

Rangy's fever ran high all through that afternoon, and as he tried to count the minutes it seemed to him that time never before had dragged along on such leaden feet. There was an insistent demand that Miss Dick should come, and that demand was leavened by the constant fear that she would not. There was the danger that she might know of his returning consciousness, that she may have heard Ike Collander talking to him; there were menaces which, in the mind of a sick man, will become warped and magnified until in the end the whole world seems distorted.

Through the dragging hours, Rangy Pete waited with what patience he could, and when at length the fading light of the sun permitted a grayness to

creep into the blue of that thin patch of skyline showing beyond the lip of the cave, his doubts grew more at ease, and he began to picture just what Miss Dick would look like when she crept out of the darkness of the cave and came to sit by his side.

It was by an effort of the will alone that he was able to close his eyes; but shortly he found that it was more restful to practice thus the feigning of unconsciousness.

Yet it was in one of those moments that the girl came to him, so that in the end he did not see her stealing out of the darkness. The first he knew of her presence was the light touch of her fingers upon his forehead. Those fingers were cool, and soft and mothering, and their faintest touch was a caress through which he fancied he could read all manner of glad tidings. He was wondering if that possessiveness in the girl's touch were but his sick imagining; then he heard her voice, pitched low, yet touched with rebuke.

"His fever is higher tonight. What have you been doing to him, Ike?"

"Nothing, Miss," Collander evaded. "He seemed to be tossing about a bit this afternoon, and that makes me think he'll soon be coming to."

"You sure, Ike, you haven't been trying to feed him something he shouldn't have, or something like that?"

"Nary a thing, Miss," Ike protested, then shortly

he rose and found some excuse to slip down over the mouth of the cave to the ground below.

With Miss Dick so near him, with her mothering fingers gently stroking the fever from his brow, and with the faint little crooning of a song upon her lips, Rangy found this assumed pose of unconsciousness a difficult thing to maintain. He wondered that she did not hear the fevered beating of his heart. Then shortly he wondered if it were fair to take advantage of her in this manner. He wondered so long that at length one eye slipped open just a trifle and he peered through the twilight at the girl's face.

The acuteness of his gaze must have carried its own message to the girl's senses, for shortly the song died upon her lips and she leaned forward eagerly.

There was such anxiety in her attitude that Rangy found his pose an objectionable thing. So he opened his eyes wide and stared up into her face.

Miss Dick gave a little cry which was all gladness.

"Ike," she called. "Here you, Ike Collander. Come here at once. He's awake."

Rangy grinned to the limit of his capacity, though he felt it was an absurd thing to do.

"They's no use calling Ike," he declared, "for I've been awake all afternoon, and he knows it. I told him to smooch it outa the way, 'cause there's something I want to say to you, little Blue Eyes."

"Then you've been fooling me by pretending to

be unconscious?" the girl demanded, with a faint suggestion of hauteur.

But Rangy's eyes held a pleading message aimed to destroy the aloofness of any feminine dignity.

"Yes, little girl, 'cause I knew I could never get along without you. I knew nothing would ever be the same again if you didn't come tonight, and since I been feeling yore fingers on my forehead, little Blue Eyes, I know I ain't never going to lose you again."

There was much more of it; there were so many gentle words falling from Rangy's lips, that at length the girl's eyes grew softer and deeper from their peering into the future, and when she leaned just a trifle closer, the man's arms raised and clasped about her neck. For a very short space of time, Miss Dick resisted the pressure of his arms, then slowly, gently, she yielded to their caress.

"But how can you ask me to marry you, Rangy?" she asked, some time later, while the sparkle was still showing in her eyes. "How can you, when you know I am just a bandit, and when you know nothing more about me?"

"There is nothing more I want to know, little Blue Eyes, except that you are you. You got a right to be a bandit if you wanta be one."

"But you were going to teach me something about the code of man," the girl reminded, with the gladness of laughter upon her lips.

"The code of man?" Rangy wondered. "Say, Blue Eyes, the code of man what I was a gonna teach to you ain't nothin', compared to the code of woman what you've taught me. If you was brought up a bandit, you shore have been a square one."

"Yes, Rangy, I was brought up a bandit," the girl broke in, with reflective tones in her voice which seemed to say there were new phases of life just opening before her. "Dervisher Dick is my daddy, and I have never known anything else but living in the hills. I never knew until lately that it was really wrong to live as the Dervishers live; but a little while ago a man came along and taught me some of the new things of life which I never knew before, and now you — "

"Another man?" Rangy demanded, with a pain in his voice which no woman could ever have mistaken. "You don't mean, Blue Eyes, that there's another man — "

"Another man taught me the first things I ever knew about right and wrong," the girl whispered "He came into the hills, and I met him by chance. He was so nice and kind, and I owe him an awful lot — "

A slight groan slipped from Rangy's lips.

"Please, don't," he muttered. "I don't think I can stand it — "

"I think you can," the girl went on, "for you know him, Rangy. And you, too, owe something to

him. I am going to tell you the man's name. He is Ring'em Foster. You remember how his punchers got me out of the Burke saloon that night when I was foolish and wanted to see something of life."

The sick man's eyes had become pained, like those of a wounded animal, and yet they looked up into her face firmly with a rebellious faith.

"And you love Ring'em?" he whispered wistfully.

Miss Dick laughed in a curious way.

"Love him? Why no! I think of him as another daddy; he was so kind to me — "

The balance of the sentence was quite smothered in the folds of Rangy's arms, and this time there was not even the faintest suggestion of resistance in the girl's manner.

"Funny, ain't it?" Rangy laughed gladly, after a few delirious minutes had raced away, "that I'm gonna take you back to Triple Butte, after all?"

"And that you are going to teach to me the code of man?" the girl whispered. "But is there no danger for you, from the Snaky Y?"

Rangy Pete was too glad to see in the future anything but the rose of promise.

"Danger?" he laughed. "They're eating out of Ring'em's hand, and I'm thinking, when they know all about it, you can have most anything you want around Triple Butte. But we won't bother with the Butte. We'll get a little ranch of our own."

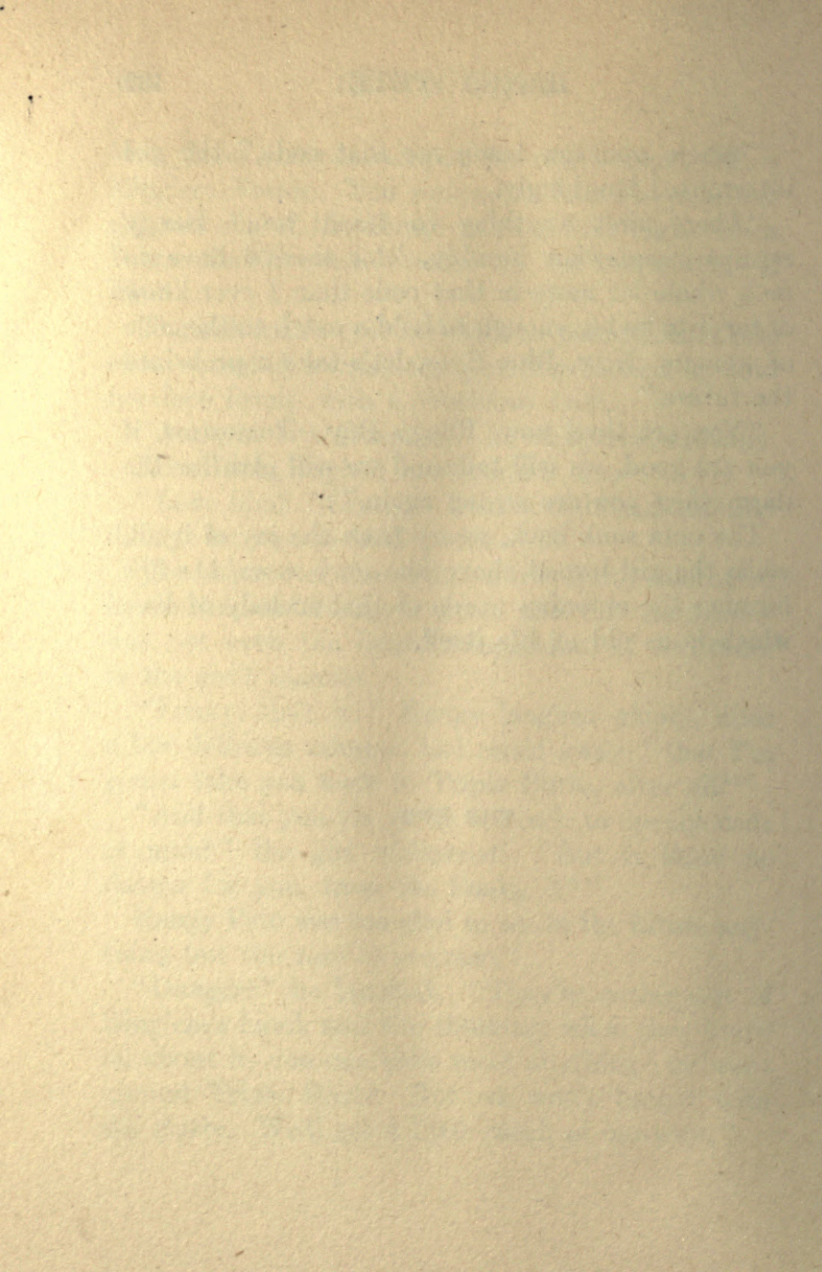
"Where you can teach me that code," the girl interrupted laughingly.

"There ain't anything to teach you," Rangy returned somewhat humbly, "for there'd have to be a whole lot more in that code than I ever knew of for it to be big enough to hold a patch to the code of woman. Now, Blue Eyes, let's take a peek into the future."

"You are tired now, Rangy Boy. Tomorrow, if you are good, we will talk and we will plan for the days when you are strong again."

The man sank back, weary from the joy of it all, while the girl leaned above him once more, her lips forming the crooning words of that melody of love which is as old as life itself.

THE END





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